



NEW LINE CINEMA

EVIL GETS AN UPGRADE



JASON

PLANET OF THE BEAST

NANCY KILPATRICK

BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION
PICTURE JASON X CREATED BY VICTOR MILLER

PROLOGUE

"Help us! For God's sake, somebody help us!" The terror-stricken face of a crewmember, who identified herself as Anita Ferendez, glanced furtively to the right. Her lips broke apart as if to scream as her left hand reached to the left, index finger poised, prepared to hit the END/SEND button. In a splitsecond, her eyes widened and her face crinkled in abject horror. The monitor blackened. Anita Ferendez disappeared.

That personal log had been short—five seconds to be exact—unless you counted the screams in the background.

Ferendez had chosen to send the message on an open wave, meaning anyone in space within a specific range could intercept it.

London Jefferson, in charge of the bridge today on the floating science lab G7, played the message for maybe the twentieth time for the three people with her, but there was nothing more. She hit the OFF button in frustration, then sat back and ran a hand through her blonde hair.

"I guess my ship better check her out," Stanislav told London, and Felicity and Bill Lawrence, the sultry dark-skinned twins who co-engineered the floating space station that housed a crew of eleven, mainly geneticists experimenting on altering the cellular structure of plants from alien environments. G7 revolved around the barren exoplanet #666—what the station's crewmembers had dubbed Planet of the Beast.

The ship from which that desperate message had been sent—*Black Star 13*, which did not respond to hails—was hurtling towards both the station and the planet.

Bill shook his head. "What in hell could have happened there?"

Visiting captain, Fedor Stanislav of the space ship *The Revival*, took on an even more serious tone as he postulated what had occurred on *Black Star 13*. "Most likely scenario is that cabin fever turned into paranoia and psychosis, and the crew went berserk. I read about something like this happening once before on a vessel,

back in the twenty-second century. We'll try to haul her into space away from you guys and the planet and check her out."

"Then you're headed back here, right?" Felicity asked, a hint of promise in her voice, as well as anxiety.

Stanislav looked at her softly, memories of pleasurable nights in her bed, spent over the two weeks he and his crew had docked their ship at G7, still fresh in his mind. "You bet, Felicity. If she's the ghost vessel the scanners say she is, we'll just board her, snag whatever logs we can, then chart her for a new course and return here until further orders arrive. If that's okay with you."

Felicity grinned, fears subsiding a bit. "You betcha, Captain Bligh!" They both laughed at her nickname for him. While he was pretty good in bed, he was no sadist, just assertive enough for Felicity, who herself was pretty aggressive. She was more than happy to hand over control once in a while, at least in the contained environment of the boudoir.

They both knew that orders from Earth II needed to travel thousands of light years, and they were pretty far out in the galaxy—Stanislav might be here for months.

"Walk me to the docking bay elevator," he said with an almost teenaged grin, and Felicity nodded.

London, the twenty-eight year-old cloning specialist, who was pretty much second in command on G7, smiled to herself—wasn't love grand? A relief from the tension of late, she thought. She had been on the bridge, watching the disturbing short personal log, studying the monitoring equipment that recorded the approach of *Black Star 13* but not recorded any responses to her hails. Now that the ship was even closer, she could view it in real-time as it neared on the monitor.

"Triple the visuals," she said. *Black Star 13* jumped in size on the screen.

"Looks like she's been to hell and back," London said.

Bill nodded, adding, "Part of her burned to a crisp. You'd think a fire that bad that could scorch the hull would have consumed the entire vessel."

"Poor design," London said.

"Must be one of ours," Bill joked and they both laughed, London's generous lips expanding across her near-perfect face. Bill's handsomely formed lips turned upward in response to this beauty, and his smile was nothing if not playful.

London never took him seriously. He was a nice guy, but she had a thing with Andre, at least for now. Still, flirting was fun, and relieved the boredom of being cloistered on a station in deep space for six months. And the tension of having to deal with a ghost ship hurtling towards them.

Twenty minutes later, the crew of *The Revival* had boarded their ship. The giant vessel had docked at G7 because it was the only place available in this sector of the sky. The crew had done a year of spacetime, checking out the galaxy for new planets, possible new homes for mankind and finding very few that science could make habitable quickly. Captain Stanislav saw a strong need for R&R; too many fights were breaking out, too many depressions had to be medicated. Everybody required relief—relief that he sensed the crew of *Black Star 13* might have needed, and did not get. And while the science station revolving around the most inhospitable of planets wasn't exactly Earth II—mankind's new home for the last couple of hundred years, ever since they made the original Earth uninhabitable—still, the floating lab was better than nothing.

Stopping here had worked out well for him. He had to admit that the past couple of weeks had been like a working pressure valve. Felicity was an unexpected delight. As far as he could tell, she was a woman after his own heart—she loved the relationship, loved sex, and she was beautiful and funny and charming—she gave her all. He'd had a bit of a fantasy about the two of them. When he got back here, he'd ask her if she entertained a similar fantasy.

He and Felicity had taken the elevator down from deck one to deck four, and walked the short corridor to the elevator that would take Stanislav further down, from the station that resembled a doughnut, into docking, which resembled a doughnut hole, a self-contained ball

with only one deck. Besides the bay that held two shuttles, two cargo bays existed in the hole, one of which was where *The Revival* was anchored.

Felicity stood outside the small elevator with him, waiting for it to ascend, and the door to swoosh open. For it to take Stanislav away from her. This was where she would say her goodbyes. "So, see you soon!" She reached up for one more kiss, rubbing her body against his so his cellular memory would recall her to his mind.

Stanislav took her in his arms and made the moment last until the elevator door opened, and an ensign, unsure of how to interrupt this tête-à-tête, cleared his throat and said, "Sir? First Officer Rogers wanted me to report to you that the crew is fully boarded and we await your orders."

"Excellent, ensign. On my way," Stanislav sighed, breaking apart from Felicity's sensuous mouth, the softness of her breasts, the curve of her hips and belly...

"Stanislav, please be careful."

"Don't worry, hon. I'll be home in time for dinner," he said, grinning, kissing her forehead, and then the elevator door shut behind him.

Felicity paused for a moment, staring at the door that had closed in her face, missing him already, inexplicably worried, wondering at this unexpected feeling of loss.

Finally, she shook her head, orienting herself in reality, and headed back to the bridge so she could watch her lover's ship depart. It should be a quick mission. The ghost ship was likely full of ravaged debris from the fire. And bodies. Scanners had found no signs of life aboard. The ship's navigational controls and life-support systems had been set on minimal automatic, and readouts indicated that had been the case for months.

The minute they picked up the ship on the far-range scanners, Felicity had checked the data banks and ascertained that this was likely *Black Star 13*. That vessel, much like Stanislav's, was an exploratory ship, making the long voyages between planets at the edges of this galaxy, sending down robotic scientists, or in some cases, small teams of human scientists to gather samples from the

surfaces of these new worlds for analysis, which were then dropped off at nearby science stations like G7, all in the hope that there might be other places in the available universe for the burgeoning inhabitants of Earth II to colonize, other resources to harvest.

The data bank said that *Black Star 13* had been out of contact for at least sixty days. Not even a long-range SOS, just random communications from hysterical crew members. Felicity immediately sent a universal communication to all ships and stations within homing range, to see if anyone had information on *Black Star 13*'s last known coordinates, particulars on their recent missions, and especially any official communications that might have involved trouble on board the ship. That data wouldn't arrive for a while, and they couldn't wait. The ghost ship was traveling at a clip and at a trajectory that would allow it to bash into G7. And even if that put it off course a bit, still, the ship would be pulled into Planet #666's orbit today, within hours. After that, especially with the hull damage, it would likely burn up in the atmosphere. What didn't would crash onto the planet's surface.

Ever since Earth became so polluted that no human could survive there, one of the important conditions of planetary research was to disturb the natural environment of a newly discovered world as little as possible. Felicity knew that there was nothing to do but for the crew of *The Revival* to board the ship, see what was what, and then set it on a course where it would sail eternally through the darkness of space without colliding with any other body. No forensics team was available this far out in space, and in truth, everyone knew that the powers-that-be, on Earth II, wouldn't spend the money or the resources for an investigation.

"He'll be back for dinner!" she told London and Bill happily as she re-entered the bridge. Her twin brother, Bill, looked at her, clearly picking up on the mixed message: cheer that disguised unease.

Bill sat at the communications panel, London kept watch on the real-time monitor, and Felicity perched at the computer screen that tracked the navigational movements of *The Revival*.

The three kept an eye on the various readings as *The Revival* powered away from G7. The cables that had anchored it to the dock

dropped slowly and gracefully in weightless space, and the ship was off, floating steadily on a direct course for *Black Star 13*.

Stanislav watched the blip on the screen that was *Black Star 13* moving away from this solar system's sun, and relentlessly towards G7 and Planet #666. He knew—had known, it seemed—her captain, Mary Frances Fine, a nice woman and an excellent leader. It was beyond him how she could've let this happen. Why did he have this sense of foreboding? It was the simplest of missions—a crew that went nuts and mutinied, and apparently managed to kill one another; a derelict vessel needing to be rerouted and fast. Maybe it was the mass-homicide that left that queasy feeling in his stomach.

As if echoing his thoughts, Rogers, his first officer standing beside him and staring at the camera's monitor said, "Sir, there's something weird about that vessel. If she's the *Black Star 13*, she's got as much hull protection as we have. If something hit her from outside, the hull shouldn't be so damaged. If a fire started onboard and for some reason couldn't be contained, by the time it reached the outer hull it would have hit the fuel rods and the ship would have exploded. Look, you can see that her engine area at the back was barbequed."

Stanislav knew that Rogers wasn't normally so negative, even before the R&R break. As if to stifle his own worries, he said gruffly, "There's an explanation for everything, lieutenant. We'll likely find it when we board her."

The Revival cruised at a steady speed, and as they neared *Black Star 13*, Stanislav gave the coordinates to position his ship close enough to attach a towline. "Half speed," he ordered. He watched his vessel's mechanical arm reach out towards *Black Star 13* and the digital readout said the computerized arm had calculated the trajectory needed.

"We're at five, sir," said Gagnon, the senior navigator the helm, "four, three, two, and one—"

"Activate arm!" Stanislav ordered, and the arm released a cable with a hook on the end. It reminded him of a fishing rod that he'd

seen in an old visual from the twenty-first century.

The cable arced and snagged one of the rings that surrounded *Black Star 13*, the same type of rings as his own vessel sported, for the same reason—it was the easiest way for one ship to snag and tow another in space.

The two ships passed each other. "Holy shit!" Rogers said, and Stanislav glanced at the real-time monitor. *Black Star 13*'s hull was more than scorched. The escape hatch on the near side of her was bashed inward, as if something from outside had tried to enter the ship, or something inside had yanked the hatch inward.

Stanislav got the next count from Miles, the petite blonde rookie, also at the navigational panel. "We've got her locked in, sir," she said. "We decelerate in five, four, three, two, one—"

"Shut down engines!" Stanislav ordered.

On the ship's intercom, Rogers announced, "All hands, brace yourselves for engine shutdown." *The Revival* slowed and came to a halt. A second later the ship jolted, as if hit by a meteor. Miles fell out of her seat. Stanislav and Rogers, who were out of practice, barely maintained their balance.

The Revival was now behind *Black Star 13*, with a solid connection line between the two. "Miles? Towing speed?"

The fledgling navigator, righting herself, said, "Level ten should do it, sir."

"Level ten it is. Engage."

The Revival appeared to start forward, but the tethered ship had more power. It pulled *The Revival* starboard and backwards towards the planet.

"Sir, I don't understand it," Miles began. "The—"

"We're headed for G7!" Lieutenant Rogers yelled.

"Boost thrusters to level twelve!" Stanislav directed. His ship slowed in its backwards movement, indicating the pull was not so great.

"Level fourteen!" he ordered.

"We're stressing our engines," Lieutenant Rogers said. "We should cut her loose."

"Should I go for emergency boosters, sir?" Miles asked.

Before Stanislav could speak, *Black Star 13* had pulled *The Revival* forward. Miraculously they missed G7 but, suddenly, were pulled into Planet #666's orbit.

"Damn it!" Stanislav yelled. The bridge fell silent. He turned on Miles.

"Sir," she began, "*Black Star's* data indicates that her engines are at level eight. There's no way we should have been pulled by her. It should have been the other way around."

Lieutenant Rogers said, "We've got to cut her loose. We can't tug her out of orbit with us, she'll pull us down with her."

"Not yet. I want to find out what happened on that ship!" Stanislav thought for a moment. "Alright, listen up. Miles, get me alongside that ship, cargo hold door to cargo hold door. I want a connecting tunnel attached fast, hold to hold. Set up a small team and we'll board her, take a quick peak. See if there are logs that haven't been damaged so we can figure out what happened. Then we cut the umbilical cord and let her crash and burn."

It was clear from Rogers's stance that he did not agree with this course of action, and Stanislav was thankful he didn't take time arguing.

The process of installing the tunnel was tedious and took more minutes than Stanislav would have liked. All the while, his ship was descending towards a planet that appeared so dark it was as if they were moving into a black hole.

Miles pulled *The Revival* close beside *Black Star 13*. Once the ship-to-ship pressurized tunnel had opened from *The Revival's* end, the robotic arm attached it to Black Star's cargo hold door. When the two were locked into place and sealed, Stanislav had Miles direct the crew in the hold to alter the tunnel's pressure. Now it was fit for humans to pass, albeit humans in space suits.

"Rogers, I want you in the captain's seat. I'm with the team. Miles, you're with me."

"Sir," Rogers began, "is that wise? Perhaps I should—"

"I got us into this, and I want to make sure I get us out again. You have your orders. You're in command."

Before he left the control room, he sent a quick voice message to Felicity's personal mail. "We hit a snag, hon. Make that breakfast instead of dinner!"

He left his officers, taking Miles with him and headed to the cargo bay in the hold of the ship.

"Sir, I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. That ship's engines—"

"Forget it, Miles," he smiled down on her, the daughter of one of his oldest friends. It was the girl's first mission, and she was as green as they come. "We have bigger fish to fry right now." He gave her shoulder a little pat, partially friendly, partially fatherly, and Miles smiled up at him with gratitude and trust in her eyes. God, they crank 'em out young, he thought. She's almost a child.

They reached the cargo hold and suited up quickly—time being of the essence now. Based on the pull towards the planet since they'd entered orbit, the bridge crew had estimated they had about one hour to reach *Black Star 13*'s computers, download any logs that hadn't been transmitted, get the hell out of there, cut her loose and fire up their own engines to push them out of orbit and back into the safety of gravity-free space.

The party of eleven that Stanislav had ordered stood suited up, at attention. The airlock opened and they all made their way hastily along the short fifteen-foot tunnel to the door of *Black Star 13*'s cargo bay.

"Open her up," he ordered the private with the laser torch, who cut the bashed-in blackened door in short order, and they all passed through the man-sized opening into the ship.

"Lights are off, just the emergency ones on, Captain," Savini, who was one of the techies, said.

"I'm aware of that."

"Want me to head to the control room and see what I can do?"

"Alright, but make it fast, and keep us posted."

Savini followed *The Revival*'s layout, assuming it to be the same here on *Black Star 13*, and headed along the corridor to the left. Meanwhile, Stanislav and the other members of his boarding party fanned out, shining their lights around the hold.

"They had a bad fire here," Miles said, acknowledging the obvious.

"Two and three man teams. Check the crew's quarters, officers' quarters, hospital, kitchen, offices, stations and common areas. Grab up all personal and ship's logs. There will be bodies, so brace yourselves. Keep your helmets on—you'll need the fresh air," Stanislav ordered. "Miles, come with me to the bridge. I want every team reporting in at five-minute intervals. Rogers, can you read all this?"

"We read you, sir. Estimated time of extinguished orbit, fifty-two minutes, ten seconds."

"Roger. I want a heads up at twenty minutes to extinguish. Every member of the landing party will rendezvous back here at the loading dock when we hear that heads up. Rogers, another heads up at ten minutes to gravitational doom. All crewmembers will, and I repeat, all crewmembers will be back on board *The Revival* at that time, and the hold door locked. And Rogers, regardless of what happens, you will order the cargo hold crew to disengage the tunnel at five minute to zero, cut *Black Star 13* loose and get *The Revival* out of here. Five minutes to zero. Is that understood?"

"Understood and acknowledged, Captain."

Stanislav followed the ship's layout as well, assuming that the bridge would be directly above and left, to the front of the ship. He and Miles made their way in the near darkness of the dim emergency lighting, taking far too long to reach the bridge with only their flashlights for illumination, and carrying the extra weight of the space suits. They were only one corridor away when, suddenly, light burst through and a low hum could be heard—full life support and power restored. "Good work, Savini," Stanislav called into his com unit.

"Thanks, sir."

Suddenly, Stanislav and Miles saw something that stopped them dead: walls that were covered in smeared blood.

"Sir," Miles began, "I don't like the look of this."

"Nor do I. Rogers, they had a bad situation here. We're seeing blood, lots of it, but no bodies. We're at the bridge and I'm entering now. I'm transferring the ship's logs to *The Revival*, do you read me Rogers?"

"Yes sir, captain. Logs coming through."

Savini heard all this on his com unit. He'd managed to get supports fully functional and felt pretty good about himself. Since he had nothing better to do before the call back to the hull, he might as well check out some of the crew's quarters down here. You never knew what treasures you might find among personal effects. These guys wouldn't need them anyway. Some would call him a ghoul, but he was just being practical. They were all dead, and this ship would be ash, or less, real soon.

He headed down a corridor that on *The Revival* would have led to the cooks' cabins. First door, the bunk was still made, the blankets so tight you could drop a coin on top and it would bounce into the air. Nothing here, just an empty room.

The next room was a double, with one bed of crumpled sheets and one almost made up, as if these guys had left in a hurry. Well, they'd had some kind of emergency, so they likely got out of their bunks fast. He looked through the closet and a night table drawer, but saw nothing of interest. He was just leaving when he thought he heard a noise back from the direction where he'd come.

"Anybody there?" No, of course, there was no one. No life forms, remember? Just the normal creaks in a space ship.

He took a step forward towards the next room when he heard a snap, like a twig, and spun around. Something? Nothing? "Okay, Savini, you're creeping yourself out." He knew it was probably the fact that he was in the rooms of guys who were dead now, guys like him, who had gone wacko, and maybe this fucking ghost ship held their spirits or something. His mom always said that the spirits of the dead linger. He just wondered where the bodies were.

He hurried along the corridor, eager to get to the cargo hold and join his crewmates. Just one more corridor to go.

The door stood open to a room on his left, and out of the corner of his eye something caught his attention: a handsome dress coat that hung on the outside of the closet door. Man, what a beauty! He stepped in and removed a glove, just to touch the fabric. Wool, some really good wool, he thought, from lambs derived on the original

Earth, and now bred on Earth II for the most select clothiers. Looked like his size too.

He took the jacket off the hook and slipped it over his shoulders. Couldn't try it on properly with the space suit, but he could get a sense if the color suited him. A full-length mirror must be inside the closet door, like there was in his room.

He opened the door. "Now, that's classy!" he said when he saw his image. He turned left, right and around, so he could see the back. But his back wasn't the only thing in the mirror.

A hulking giant stood in the corner. It was made from metal and flesh and bone, and wearing some kind of weird mask. Its eyes were cold blue, with no feeling at all. None. Savini gasped and spun around quickly. He felt his heart almost stop beating as an arm reached out towards him. He stepped back towards the room's door.

"Hey man, good to see you! We thought all you guys were dead." Now he saw what extended from the giant's other arm: a wide blade, so long and sharp that the light reflecting off the edge hurt his eyes like direct sunlight.

What did this guy want? Oh, the jacket. He must want his jacket. Savini slipped it off his shoulders, holding it out in front of him. "Here you go, man. Just tryin' it on. It's a beauty." Even at the back of his mind he knew this jacket could not belong to this guy, who was twice his size.

Savini felt that he was about to piss his pants. Every step backwards he took, the guy took a step towards him. "I... I found—"

The extending hand went down, the one with the blade went up. It sliced up so fast between Savini's legs that he plummeted into shock instantly. He felt no pain at all in his genitals, just a sense that he was peeing. No pain, no terror. At least not until he glanced in the mirror behind the giant and saw that it wasn't urine coming from his crotch but a flow of red. He looked down to see that which had always made him a man now lying at his feet. He screamed.

"What in hell was that?" Stanislav tensed as the voice crashed out of the radio. "Everyone, report in, immediately."

Three teams of two reported. A team of two, a team of three; Savini did not. "Savini, where in hell are you?" Stanislav demanded. He specifically called the other teams that had not reported in. Nothing.

"Sir, what's happening there?" Rogers wanted to know. "We're thirty minutes from extinguishing gravitational pull."

"All crew members from *The Revival* on board *Black Star 13*, return to the cargo hold immediately. We are abandoning this mission now. This is an order. Do you read me? Report to the cargo hold to abandon ship."

Of the three teams that had reported in, only two responded to this order, and one further contact as Stanislav and Miles who were en route had only one team calling in. What Stanislav did hear was the shrieks of terror, the voices of his crew as they battled "him" as some screamed, and "it" as others cried. The captain had no idea what was going on. As he and Miles ran back along the blood-drenched corridors towards the cargo hold, he could only imagine the worst.

"Sir," Miles panted as she struggled to keep up with him, carrying the weight of the heavy suit on her small body, "are they dead? What could be happening?"

Instead of answering her, he called his lieutenant. "Rogers, listen up. We've got danger aboard *Black Star 13*. The boarding team is headed back to the cargo hold, and we will abandon this ship immediately. Get ready to order the hold crew to seal that door the instant we're back onboard, then cut this damned vessel loose and get us the hell out of here."

"Roger, captain," the Lieutenant said. "We're now fifteen minutes from gravitational extinction."

Stanislav and Miles reached the hold, both out of breath. He listened to the com unit attached to his helmet but only dead air met him. "This is Captain Stanislav. All teams on *Black Star 13* report in immediately." Dead air.

"Lieutenant, we're returning to *The Revival*. Hold off on disengaging *Black Star 13* until my order."

"Roger, captain."

Stanislav and Miles went through the tunnel, and once they were safely on board *The Revival*, both removed their helmets and handed them to the crew waiting for them on the other side. The captain tried one last call for teams on *Black Star 13*. Nothing.

"Lieutenant, disengage."

"Aye, sir."

Suddenly another voice from the bridge said, "Sir, there's movement in the tunnel. Somebody's trying to get home."

"Lieutenant, belay that order. Who's in the tunnel?" Stanislav called over the com. No words, just heavy breathing.

"Sir? He's in the airlock on our side," one of the hold crewmembers said.

"Can we get a visual?"

"No, sir. The tunnel was set up too fast to install visual monitors."

"Shut the airlock to the tunnel and open the hold door," Stanislav said, trying to ignore the gut feeling warning him not to. He motioned for one of the security guards to hand over his extra weapon.

"Sir," Miles said in a quiet voice, "we don't know what was happening back there, what happened to our teams, maybe we should wait—"

But the airlock door on *The Revival's* side was already sliding open. What stood in the doorway was not a member of *The Revival's* crew, nor one from *Black Star 13*, but someone or something that left the jaws of those in the hold dropped to their chests.

"Sir," Rogers said, "we are five minutes to gravitational extinction. Request permission to disengage."

"Rogers—" Captain Stanislav began, but the steel and flesh giant stomped forward, and grabbed him by the throat.

"Oh my God, Captain Stanislav," Miles cried. "Help, someone help him."

Weapons fired, at least a dozen of them. Laser beams ripped through the metal suit and mask, hitting Jason X from all sides. To the amazed eyes of the docking crew, he buckled from the attack, but was not felled.

"Captain? Sir? Miles? Any crew in the hold, report in."

But the small crew was too busy to report to Rogers. Stanislav felt his windpipe ripped from his throat.

The three security crewmembers had rushed to Stanislav's side, trying to pull the giant off of their captain. For their trouble, Jason X slashed one across the face with his machete, splitting his eyes in half horizontally. Another had the top of his head lopped off, exposing the cap of brain matter. Their screams accompanied the last security guard, who rushed to the door of the hold to escape, yelling, "He's killed the captain. He's killed him."

"Captain, any crew in the hold, come in." Miles heard Rogers call. Then he ordered, "Disengage arm."

Miles raced after the fleeing crewman. Suddenly she was flying backwards. The killer giant snagged her hair and pulled her into the room that now felt like a tomb. She slipped on Stanislav's blood, which was still gushing from his throat. The captain still stood there, eyes bulging, holding his neck with both hands, but that gesture could not stop the bleeding that would soon terminate his life, and he weakened, falling to his knees.

"Lieutenant, sir, the tunnel is still open. We need to manually disengage the tunnel. Someone has to go down to the hold," Miles heard over the com system, as she lay on her stomach, like a baby, paralyzed with fear, waiting. Suddenly, an impulse made her turn over, onto her back.

Above her stood Jason X, looking around the room as if searching for more victims.

Just when she thought that he would leave her in peace, when that fantasy enveloped her, Jason X turned his head and looked down, those dead blue eyes through the mask's openings locking onto her pale green ones, and she could only whisper, "Why?" In an instant too quick to believe, he leapt into the air and came down hard on her stomach. Her eyes bulged, and her mouth gaped as organs were crushed, or forced up or down her body. Blood burst from her mouth and she didn't have the wind left to scream. And then he jumped again, smashing her down into the floor, severing from their source everything internal that made up her young body, so full of promise for the future.

That body, now beyond repair, lay close to Stanislav's, and she watched the light fade from his eyes as she felt it dimming in her own. Between them, the feet of the monstrous Jason X stomped from the cargo hold. She tried to speak, to warn the rest of the crew, but only a gurgling came from her lips, much like the one that had come from Stanislav before he succumbed. Jason X had silenced them both.

"Disengage the cable attached to *Black Star 13*," Lieutenant Rogers ordered. "It should rip the tunnel away."

"Sir, that will create a vortex in the cargo hold and suck everything inside this ship outside."

"Seal the door between the hold and the rest of the ship."

"I can do that, sir, but the force of the—"

"Do it, and seal off that entire corridor."

"The crew in section 27 will be sucked out, even if the rest of us—"

"Do it," Rogers snapped.

"Sir, the cable is stuck, sir. We can't disengage."

"Engines full power, and apply boosters."

It was a feeble attempt, too little, too late, and everyone on *The Revival* knew that. The gravitational pull of Planet #666 increased because they were much closer to the surface. If they had tried this when they first entered orbit, perhaps...

Lieutenant Rogers checked the controls. It was less than a minute to gravitational extinction.

Screams rang throughout the ship, filling the audio receivers of *The Revival's* com panel, and the bridge crew was surrounded by the sound of death. The hands of most of the bridge crew fell away from their crew stations while they listened to their crew mates being slaughtered.

"Engines are about to overload," an engineer said, his voice flat with hopelessness. "We have no power reserves. What shall we do, sir?"

Lieutenant Rogers paused a heartbeat. "What we are going to do, corporal, is pray."

The crew on the bridge of G7, increased by one as Emery Peterson had joined them, heard all that transpired. They had listened in stunned silence as the carnage ensued. And now they watched the monitors, as both *Black Star 13* and *The Revival* left the gravitational orbit of Planet #666, picked up speed and dropped at a high velocity towards the dark planet's surface.

The Revival's crew was utterly and eerily silent. At least there were no orders being given, no commands followed, only the screams.

The G7 bridge crew heard a loud bang followed by a dead silence.

"Come in, *Revival*," Bill said. "*Revival*, come in. Are there any survivors?" Nothing.

Felicity had clicked into work mode, relegating her feelings temporarily to a back burner. She reached across the panel of readouts to scan the ship. "No life signs. No systems operational. *The Revival* is gone."

Everyone in the room, even the twerp, Emery, who normally couldn't keep his mouth shut, remained quiet while Bill kept calling for *The Revival* to come in.

Felicity stood, amazed that her legs were so stable—she wouldn't have thought they could hold her up. Right now she felt little, considering that her world had just been shattered, in what had only been moments. Wasn't it a mere hour ago that she had been kissing Stanislav? Weren't her dreams somehow hooked up to his? Where were those dreams now? A pile of ash, on the surface of some Godforsaken planet in the middle of nowhere. She would be bitter, but later after the agony passed.

She walked to the door to leave the bridge and saw the interspace communications panel light up. Someone, somewhere was trying to reach them. She went back to click on RECEIVE, and a message came from G21, another science station in a different quadrant of the galaxy. She put the message on audio.

"G7, got your message. We had contact with *Black Star 13* when she left here ninety days ago. Last we knew, she was headed back to Earth II, transporting cargo in the form of a body, someone called

Jay or James or Jason, I think. Didn't get the last name. That's all we know. Hope knowing this helps."

Felicity switched off the message, then turned and walked out the door, saying softly to herself, "It doesn't."

Emery followed her off the bridge. He hurried along, eager to reach the lab. He had some very important news to convey to his boss, Professor Claude Bardox. Very important indeed.

ONE

"I've got one," the dark-haired, dark-eyed Bella Morte screamed. Real name: Bella Morrison, ace lab techie, ancestry on the original Earth from Lyons—not the one in France, but a tiny town in Kansas. A little mystery never hurt a girl, London Jefferson thought, and besides, the self-inflicted nickname, with accompanying spooky makeup and hairstyle, was so far from Bella's cheery personality that it was too funny.

"I'm frightened already," Brandi said, deadpan. All business, as usual, the doctor pulled the heart-monitor from her pocket, no doubt anxious to get back to her surgery and use her time more productively.

"Go for it, grim girl," London egged Bella on. "We could all use another creepy bedtime story."

The group that comprised about eighty percent of space station G7's eleven highly specialized crewmembers, relaxed around the solar panels of the common room, a science lab's version of a campfire. This had become a weekly ritual that began with each crewmember trying to better the others by relating tales of insanity and violence. Initially, any macabre story was welcomed—London had told her own unnerving Sasquatch legend from New Saskatchewan, so named after the original Saskatchewan on the original Earth. It was the flattest and driest of corners on Earth II, where she was born and lived enough of her life that she knew she wanted out. The Sasquatch was a kind of pre-historic giant that roamed the Rocky Mountains on the original Earth. There were sightings here and there, but nobody had ever seen enough of him to verify that he actually existed. On other parts of that planet they called him Big Foot, and his footprints gave him away.

London's story was well received, although no one thought that the Sasquatch was particularly scary. And once Bella Morte began regaling them with the adventures of the legendary slicer and dicer, Jason, who had terrorized the original Earth, that's all anybody wanted to hear. Especially now, two weeks after what had happened

with *The Revival*. It was as if the details of these stories substituted for the missing details of reality, and they needed something to soften the blow.

There were the usual half-hearted grumblings around the room about unfinished work, about personal logs to send. Yeah, London thought, we all know this is silly kid stuff, since Jason was, after all, just a grisly fantasy from the old Earth. But when you're stuck in deep space, orbiting a dreary, dark planet at the edge of the Milky Way, which is so bleak it doesn't even have a name, for God's sake, just a number—666—what everybody had taken to calling "The Planet of the Beast." When you're so far away from your dearly missed, blue and green and brown Earth II, and everyone and everything that was familiar and sustained you. When a crew surrounds you that, until six months ago, you hadn't even known existed, any diversion would do. And the Jason stories, which Bella told so well and illustrated with holograms, were better than most to get the blood circulating. Beats a session on the treadmill, London thought.

She leaned into Andre, a DNA specialist who had joined the crew, of mainly scientists, at the last minute for this five-year mission. Tall, slim, with black hair that contrasted with her blonde, very nice clear hazel eyes, with flecks of green that matched the green of her own, a great solid butt, he was the kind of guy she would have been attracted to anyway, but here on G7, they quickly managed to form more than a friendship.

Andre was a good guy, decent, fun, intelligent, sexy... She just wished he had bit more orientation towards a future that involved the two of them together. Whenever she brought up the subject, he managed to brush her off, and after a while, it seemed intentional.

London didn't mind, for now. But he felt like mate-for-life material, and if he didn't want to go that way, she wanted to know sooner rather than later so she could adjust her emotions. Her goals included fascinating work, a spouse she loved and who loved her back, and children. Twenty-eight wasn't old, but it wasn't young. Her own mother had almost "missed the boat," as she said, and London

was born later in her life, a move her mother says she did not regret, but London always had a few doubts about that.

Andre slipped his arm around London's shoulders and she nestled closer to listen as Bella Morte's chilling tale got underway.

"Okay, guys, picture this: planet Earth, before it became too contaminated to support life. Mist clings to the Spanish moss draped from the branches of the ancient oak trees surrounding the northern Louisiana swamp, hiding, it seems, something abominable—"

"Not another swamp story." Helmet Schmidt, G7's second in command of security, slapped his hands on top of his bald, tattooed head and groaned in a deep and dramatic manner.

"Shush," Akako snapped. To look at her, you'd never think this petite, Zen-like flora specialist could defend herself, let alone enter attack mode in a nanosecond, but there you go; looks are deceiving. London had watched this twenty-three year-old on more than one occasion dominate someone twice her stature. And in fact Helmet—who suddenly sat back to listen attentively—was twice her size. Akako had a few anger-management issues, but London figured they all did after half a year of forced confinement.

The good-natured Bella Morte resumed her tale, her voice dropping as she instructed the computer: "Illumination. Fifty percent, please."

The lighting dimmed immediately. "Holograph Jason number twenty-seven on, authorization Bella Morte." The room lit with a three-dimensional simulation of old Earth, Louisiana swampland that illustrated the opening of the story as Bella Morte spoke the words.

"Well done, Bella," London said.

She smiled and resumed her tale.

"One night, when the moon seemed deflated, and enough of the gas molecules that form the air had turned to liquid, a percentage that went way beyond normal humidity in Louisiana, a sound reverberated through the deathly-still night. The living felt as if an earthquake had struck, but there were no quakes in this land of low water tables, devoid of mountains and awash in swampland.

"The soldiers at nearby Fort Polk heard it, good men and women trained as specialists in the art of high-tech killing. They say objects crashed to the ground, barracks shook on their shallow foundations, the soil underfoot trembled, and when the soldiers looked up, falling stars littered the sky as if doomsday had finally arrived. A sergeant and five privates were sent to the nearby swamp to investigate. As they headed out, the base commander overheard this conversation...

"Listen up, y'all. It's Jason!" Private Simon, a local boy, signed up for service the second he hit eighteen, had never once in his life tolerated being called Simple Simon. He possessed an authoritative voice that the others listened to.

"You don't know that," Wiley, the timid pixyish private second class said.

"Yep, I do, sweetie. Back in Virginny, my first cousin Elmer, he tol' me 'bout him."

"Man, Jason is just a story." That was DH Lawrence, an African American from Philadelphia, so named by his librarian mother after her favorite author.

"Y'all believe what ya want, but all the signs is right," Simon said, re-lacing one boot tightly.

"Fuck man, Jason can't be stopped." Phillips, personal fan of Simon, interjected a statement that he saw proved the existence of the cold blooded serial killer Jason. Where he'd first heard this, he didn't know, but it rang true.

"Jason's a killin' machine, that's a fact, and we're headin' out to meet our maker." Simon spat into the grass.

"This is such bullshit," Wiley snapped.

In a flash, Simon whipped out the Bowie knife he carried inside his boot and threw it from the blade end at Wiley. It landed in the grass close to her feet. Startled, she stared down at the knife. A deadly coral snake—or a fake coral, she still couldn't tell the difference—lay pinned to the earth by the knife blade, just inches from her left foot.

"Th—thanks," she stuttered.

Simon grabbed up his knife, wiped the blade on his pant leg and slipped it back inside his boot. "Yep. Headin' to meet our maker—"

"Can it, soldiers!" Sergeant Esposito roared. "No more girly talk. This is the US Army. A man's army, machismo, got it? Whoever or whatever enemy alien we encounter we can, and will, take him, her or it out. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sergeant!" the four soldiers shouted as a well-trained unit.

As the base commander watched from headquarters, Esposito marched his small band of soldiers past the white clapboard barracks lined up like pencils by an obsessive organizer, out through the main gate, and along the dirt road that led to the paved two-lane. The highway was normally empty but for army jeeps and convoys of trucks carrying personnel and supplies, especially at this hour, and this evening proved no exception.

"Halt!" Esposito ordered. The soldiers came to a stop. "Fall out!" They now proceeded at their own pace along the blacktop. Wiley and DH Lawrence both looked up and understood that the other was also aware of the darkening sky and the rising moon.

"Look at that, will you?" said DH Lawrence. "A harvest moon."

"It's June." Alisha Wiley stared at the blood-red ball in the sky. In her head she knew that red-dust particles in the atmosphere were responsible for the color. So then why did her heart go arrhythmic?

"What the fuck?" Phillips gawked at the red globe hanging ominously above them.

"That's our blood," Simon assured them all.

"Put a stopper in it before I do!" Sergeant Esposito snarled, and the group fell silent.

In fact, silence took over the land. Nothing moved, nothing breathed, just the six humans, trudging through almost unbearable heat that weighed them down and squeezed sweat from their pores.

"Halt!" Esposito, a stickler for protocol, ordered, raising his right hand. He used the beam of his non-army-issue penlight to read the communiqué from the base commander, which included a small map.

"Here's where we turn. The epicenter is in there." He pointed the penlight into the gloom of the black swamp. Trees—mostly willows—

bent low, their leaves touching the rank water that, had there been light, the solders would have seen was covered with puke-green moss. They all knew the swamps bred life of every kind, most of it dangerous to humans, especially the swarms of mosquitoes many of which carried the West Nile virus, mosquitoes they encountered right now as they headed into the blackness. Each soldier slipped mosquito netting over his or her head as they proceeded, and spraying NN-diethyl-meta-toluamide on exposed skin.

The small platoon headed into the water. The low water table allowed for little soil, and water seeped up everywhere around them even before they stepped down into the swamp itself. When they did, they were knee-high in muck, at least the men were; Alisha Wiley was thigh-high.

"Keep your eyes open, ladies," the Sergeant Esposito said.

"What the fuck?" Phillips cried, swatting his hand. He flicked away the big bloodsucker.

"Better don some gloves, soldier," Sergeant Esposito told him in a tone that sounded like an order.

They waded through the stinky water in silence, but for the buzzing of the tiny flying vampires. Once in a while smack and a curse rang out as one of the soldiers slapped at a bug that had managed to penetrate the army fatigues.

"Wiley, you're point man," he told the diminutive private, who had enlisted for the college benefits but now had second thoughts about this career strategy.

"Yes, sir!" She headed out in advance of the mini platoon, arms shoulder high, holding her M-16 rifle with both hands and her high-powered flashlight as well, even though most of the light was eaten by the darkness.

Every tree looked sinister to her, every patch of moss a cover for a 'gator, or some other predator. She reached down and patted her hip holster and the Beretta 9mm, just to reassure herself, hoping she didn't sink and get the handgun wet. Is this why she joined the US Army? To walk crotch deep in water that reeked of decaying things? In pitch darkness? Was this a career? What had she been thinking?

Wiley stopped moving for a moment and listened. Not even crickets. Nothing. That wasn't right. And already she was so far in advance that she could barely hear the water splashing around the men behind her as they walked. Nothing to report yet, so no need to radio in.

The remainder of the platoon trudged through the swamp at a decent clip, considering the environment. DH Lawrence, who had always been a studious type, adjusted his wire rim glasses as he fell back to examine a tree which was so distorted that it resembled a huge hockey player. He'd always loved hockey, especially the Flyers, his home team back in Philly. It was something about the smooth movement on ice. Lawrence himself wasn't a graceful man, tripping over his own feet more often than not, preferring to read books rather than work out. Still, he could admire physical activity, the grace and beauty, and the skill of a sport well done.

While the little band moved out of earshot, Lawrence approached the tree, hoping to examine it close up, maybe use it some day in a book he might write. But as he neared, the tree seemed to move. No wind he could discern. The light in his flash flickered, and then dimmed—damn. He'd forgotten to change the batteries again. Why was he so out of touch with concrete reality?

He looked at the tree with regret. In the dim light it sure did resemble a man. A huge man. Must be eight feet tall to the top where the tree just stopped and rounded off, kind of like a head. It made him think of the top of a hockey mask, and he chuckled to himself.

Reluctantly he started to turn to rejoin the others. He had not even gotten his back to the tree when something cut into his shoulder, so deep he felt it penetrate all the way through. In the darkness, stunned, he looked down but could see nothing. Gingerly he touched the spot at the front of his shoulder where it was beginning to hurt, and hurt real bad. Something sharp protruded. It was shaped like a hockey stick blade, but sharp enough that he cut his hand on the tip right through the glove he wore. And then it was gone.

Lawrence rested his hand on his shoulder and felt wetness through the cut in the glove. He looked behind him. The tree was gone. When he turned back, it stood before him, hulking, stalking. He opened his

mouth to scream and a branch sliced out, a metal branch like a hockey stick, the blade of which glinted moonlight. It moved so fast he couldn't see where it struck, couldn't feel a thing. A referee in his head yelled, "Body check! Illegal!" He blinked once. Twice. Where had the blade struck him? Why did he feel nothing? Through his narrow spectacles he looked down to watch himself drop into the water. Not all of him, though. In his last moments of silent consciousness, he saw his body just before immersion. In that instant he knew that "he" was no longer attached to "it."

"Hold up," Sergeant Esposito said. He used his heavy-duty flashlight, waving the beam through the gloom. "Where's Lawrence?" he asked.

The other three looked at one another, and around them.

"He was right behind me, sir," Phillips said, looking a bit frightened in the eerie light.

Esposito knew that facing fear was superior to ducking it. "Phillips, head back and find Lawrence, Here." He tossed Phillips one of the three walkie-talkies—Esposito kept one and Wiley had the other. "Radio when you find the son of a bitch, and get your asses up here with the rest of us."

"Yes, sir!" Phillips said, relishing the importance of the task, dreading being off on his own.

"Simon, you're with me," Esposito said.

"Yes sir." And he muttered, "T' our doom."

"What was that, private?"

"Nothin' important, sir."

"Then keep your trap shut. We don't want to draw any predators our way."

Phillips turned and sloshed through the water, making enough noise to alert every predator north of Baton Rouge to his whereabouts. "Lawrence?" he called softly, then stopped to listen. "DH? Where in hell are you, man?" Nothing. Nothing at all. Just the damned mosquitoes buzzing everywhere. Like flies around a corpse.

This was a fool's mission, he knew, trudging through swampland in the dark. Why the hell can't the army wait for morning like a normal person? Some light would help. It's not like anybody was in

danger from whatever in hell they saw on their damned radar or sonar or whatever the fuck type of technology it was that told them that this stupid swamp was the source of the disturbance...

His light picked up something round bobbing in the water. "What the fuck?"

Suddenly he saw something slash out—what? The round thing, what he now recognized as DH Lawrence's head, went sailing up out of the water straight towards the middle of two trees. It cleared them right in the middle, like the damned hockey puck between the goal posts that Lawrence went on and on about.

As Phillips watched this, he did four things in this order: when he saw Lawrence's head spinning over and over on itself as it flew through the air, he gasped. At the same moment he pressed the button on his walkie-talkie to call for help and also pulled his 9mm from its holster. The fourth thing he did was his last, and it was an action that he did not initiate. Phillips saw a giant, and before he could register more, a blade came down onto his head and severed it in two from the top to the neck. His vision went wonky; pain soared through him. Suddenly his entire body went sailing up through the air, bashing into tree limbs. The wound divided his brain in two, down the corpus callosum, disconnecting forever the right and left hemispheres, leaving him unable to put together a cohesive thought, let alone get the safety-catch off the gun and fire it. But, as he crashed into one final tree limb that staked him through the intestines, a mini-thought did form for Phillips, and dissipate within the split second before he was no more: "What the fuck?"

Sergeant Esposito and Private Simon heard Phillips's last gasp over the walkie-talkie.

"Report in, Private Phillips. Over," the sergeant was saying for the fifth time. Nothing came back at him but dead air.

"What now, sir?" Simon said. "We go back and rescue him too, or push on?"

Esposito glared at the underling who always managed to irritate him with that know-it-all tone to his voice.

"They're big boys, private. They can take care of themselves. They've got sidearms and M-16s, and if they were attacked by 'gators

we'd have heard shots."

"If they had time to pull their firepower, sir." Simon addressed his commanding officer as an afterthought deliberately. He didn't respect Esposito. He only respected commissioned officers, where he was headed himself, with no stop at the non-com level. He's already applied for officer training school. He didn't intend to be a grunt all his life and—

The stagnant water around them began to ripple.

"Phillips?" Esposito said. "That you?" He paused. "Speak up, soldier."

"Ain't him," Simon said, dropping the address and pulling his sidearm. "It's Jason."

As if in response, trees began falling all around them, their trunks snapping as if they were branches. A dark hulking form emerged from the greater darkness, and Esposito aimed his powerful beam at the figure while he jerked his M-16 waist high. A man, a giant of a man, wearing... a hockey mask? Could that be? It must be. His upper arms were big as hams, his thighs concrete sewer pipes. He was dressed like some farm boy, a hick, a rejected hillbilly. He stood motionless, the light picking up a spark of something from eyes as dark as any dead man's.

"Halt," Esposito ordered. "Identify yourself."

For a moment all three of them paused just long enough to take a breath. Finally, Simon exhaled, "It's Jason. I knew it."

"Your weapons at the ready," Esposito ordered his underling calmly, and Simon snapped the safety off his Beretta and lifted it to join his M-16 at chest level.

"This is Staff Sergeant Esposito of the United States Army. Identify yourself!" The order was barked out into the night. The silence that followed felt far from empty.

Suddenly the huge figure charged. Jason crashed towards them like a powerful linebacker on methamphetamines. A volley of gunfire rang out, round after round. Esposito changed clips in the M16 then Simon did the same. Jason jolted from hit after hit but kept coming. He was about to steamroller over them.

"Right flank him," Esposito yelled, and Simon started to move to the right while Esposito went left. They might not have bothered. Jason stretched out his arms crucifixion-style and grabbed both at the waist with vice-like hands.

Simon's body doubled over and Esposito's stretched backwards, two different reactions to the same type of assault. Gunfire lit the sky as more rounds were fired willy-nilly, but before they could react in any other way, Jason tossed both men up into the air. Then he pulled a massive machete from his waistband. As the two men fell, Jason severed the right arm of one and the left of the other, then a leg of each. Limbs dropped and sliced arteries spurted blood in every direction. The two men who, until those moments, had never had much in common, died within seconds of one another, and Jason let their bloody bodies sink into the swamp in his wake as he stomped forward to hunt down the fifth member of the ill-fated platoon.

Wiley had heard it all on her small walkie-talkie. Eyes wide in terror, she stood in the hot swamp as if frozen, unable to decide what to do. She had called in during the heat of it, knowing there would be no response until the fight was over. Believing that the response would surely come from Esposito, she waited. And waited. Nothing but static, which told her everything she needed to know.

Heart pounding, her legs seemed stuck in quicksand because they had no clear direction from her. She couldn't go back there, even to find out what happened to her buddies. Not now, not with unknown danger waiting. If Esposito couldn't take whoever out, how could she hope to? Could the entire fire team be dead? She couldn't let herself go there. But, forging ahead was moving further into the swamp, and that made her more vulnerable. She'd only been down here two weeks; she didn't know this terrain. A quick glance at her compass told her that the base was south, to the right of her, but memory said the length of the swamp moved that way and it would be a long slog home. What to do? What to do?

The decision was taken out of her hands. In an instant too quick to recount, had she been able to, pain shot through her calf, at least the part that was left. The alligator, head above the surface, almost a smile on its reptilian face, had the partial limb clamped in his maw.

That part of her body was missing and in the mouth of a giant lizard only registered when she saw her booted foot dangling from in its hinged jaw. Her scream was delayed, and so was Jason, but he caught up to the human being writing in pain, blood gushing from her thigh above the knee, blood he could smell even before he saw her.

When Wiley saw Jason coming, she reached out a hand for help. Until he got close enough for her to see his face. His mask. Then she stopped, pale in the intermittent moonlight as clouds now streaked across what was earlier a clear sky, moonlight that could barely penetrate the swampland. She waited so patiently for her death that he became eager to give it to her. And so he did.

Jason kicked her in the kneecap, breaking it, and with her only leg now useless, Wiley fell into the swamp face first. Jason could have let her drown on her own, but she thrashed so hard and life beat so strongly in her that he instinctively pushed her under the water, feeling her flailing, body jerking and fighting for air, for life, until she fought no more and she was still.

All the while, the 'gator with Wiley's leg still in its mouth stayed back, off to the side, watching, locking eyes with Jason, recognizing a coldblooded predator when it saw one.

The base commander would remember the conversation of the fragmented fire team before they left the base. He'd remember it long after the sun rose, past the hours he had viewed what the new detachment he'd led found when they searched for Staff Sergeant Esposito and his four soldiers.

Over twenty body parts were strewn everywhere, floating in the swamp water, caught in the thick Spanish moss hanging from the trees, limbs ripped from torsos, skin shredded, bones crushed, faces unrecognizable, eyeballs and tongues and teeth everywhere like grotesque candies, the finger of one hand pointing as if to say, "He went that-away." And the blood... He would always remember the blood, not so much the sight of it coating torsos and felled trees but more the odor mixed with swamp sewage, and in the middle of many nights, he'd awake to find himself crying silent tears and wondering how God Almighty could allow such an atrocity to be committed...

Everyone in the room was silent. Suddenly, London clapped, and Andre joined in, but they were the only two of the cynical group to do so.

Akako was the first to try to debunk the story. "Okay, so why did they go into the swamp at night? I mean, if they had any sense, like Wiley said, they'd have waited for daylight. Were they stupid, or what?"

"Well, they were soldiers," Bella Morte said, "and had to follow orders—"

"So their bosses were stupid. And they were too stupid to act on their own initiative. And they don't sound like they put up much of a fight anyway."

"Jason is as strong as ten people, and he knows how to sneak up on you, even when he's in full view. That's why he's so dangerous—"

"Where did he get the blade?" Helmet wanted to know.

"What blade?"

"He cut them with a big knife. Did he bring it along?"

Bella Morte's eyebrows lifted. "Jason always carries a machete. That's part of who he is. I told you that in the last installment."

"Right! But a guy that big would make some noise—"

"An alligator?" Andre cut in, laughing. "That's pretty cheap!"

London, getting into the spirit of it said, "If they'd analyzed their data better, they would have known there was a human being in the swamp. I mean, it's unclear what these soldiers were looking for anyway. Something fell from the sky? A seismic occurrence? What?"

"But they just got computers at the end of the twentieth century," Bella Morte insisted. "They probably did the best they could with the limited amount of data they had. And besides, computers were much slower then."

Renata Henderson, head of the lab's security, shook her hairless head once in the negative. "Those M-16s were primitive, that's for sure. A friend of mine collects antique guns and let me fire his once. They have quite a kick by today's laser standards, and you had to

keep reloading the magazine. Did you know they run on bullets, a stupid blend of gunpowder being forced from a cylinder? But primitive or not, they should have taken this Jason guy out. Unless he was bionic."

"I could have taken him with my bare hands," Helmet said, jumping to his feet, assuming a fighter's stance. "No way would he get by me!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." Renata reached up and punched his thigh in the good-natured way of bodybuilding types. "Maybe, if you had me for backup."

"Backup. Ha! Wouldn't need it."

"Who's head of security?"

"You, but that's just because I got that demerit on my record or I'd be—"

"That's the thing," Bella Morte interrupted. "Jason can never be killed. He's eternal. No matter what anybody ever did to him, he always survived it. He's immortal."

"Immortal! He wouldn't survive space, that's for sure," Renata sneered, standing and stretching, showing off the rippling muscles in her chest and shoulders through her T-shirt while Helmet looked on with grudging admiration. Basically, she wanted him to see why she was head of security.

And Helmet did. The woman worked out six times a day, twice as often and three times as long as he did, and the work showed on her body. He hated to admit it, and never would verbally, but he was lazy, and she was pretty good, maybe his equal. Naw, he couldn't entertain such stupid thoughts. No woman could best a man for muscle development.

He was about to open his mouth and say something witty when Renata said, "Well, it's just a story, so you can tell it any way you like. In reality there's no Jason, and even if there was, our modern laser weapons would take him out instantly."

Bella Morte began, "I'm not so sure—"

"This is how you people waste your time?" Claude Bardox snapped. "Some of you are scientists, and should know better!"

The prematurely graying boss of the science lab stood in the doorway, his tall, average-weight body seeming to take up a lot of space, likely from tension. All eyes were drawn, as usual, to his prosthetic arm made of black metal. He always wore the sleeve of that arm rolled up defiantly, as if to draw attention to the fact that his body had rejected innumerable cloned arms, and if he was going to be stuck with a fake limb he wanted a metallic limb, not some cheap imitation of flesh.

No one knew if he'd heard any or all of the story, but everyone understood that Bardox held an opinion on everything, and that no matter what any of them said or did, they all fell about a mile short of his approval, which meant none tried to live up to his standards. None but his sidekick, Emery Peterson. He stood behind Bardox with an annoying and unjustifiably satisfied appearance on his face, as if daddy had just spanked the siblings.

Before Bella Morte could say it, the head geneticist commanded, "Lights up." Instantly the holo images were vanquished by white light that made everyone blink madly until their eyes could adjust.

Bardox bent his forty-year-old body forward around the doorframe, reminding London of a flexible praying mantis. He peered intently at each of them, recording in his computer-like brain exactly who was there, enjoying themselves, "wasting time" as he put it. The small bald spot at the top of his head glowed in the bright light like a shiny egg, and London swallowed a laugh at this silly image.

"While you're all in here telling childish stories, I am forced to halt my research."

London, suddenly furious, said in a low voice, "What we do on our personal downtime is our own business."

He only glanced at her, and then turned to Renata. "I require a shuttle immediately. I must go to Planet #666 as soon as possible."

"Now?" Renata glanced at her watch. "It's the middle of the night."

"Night is irrelevant in space," came the reedy voice of Bardox's assistant, who stepped out into the light from behind his boss and his idol. Round-eyed, brown-eyed, bespectacled Emery Peterson, of a fragile and awkward physical nature, and a simple personality,

worshiped Bardox's brilliant mind. Basking in the big kahuna's radiance meant that one day the twenty-five year old, too, would be wealthy and famous beyond his wildest dreams, even though he could never emulate what Bardox had, and would still, accomplish in the field of genetic mutation. Bardox had already let Emery sign his name to a lesser academic paper that focused on this very subject of time in relation to genetics. Despite most of the crew insinuating that he was a yes-man, Emery felt he was his own person. They couldn't seem to understand that Bardox was such a genius that there was never a need to dispute him. "Time in space," Emery continued, pulling himself up to his full five feet five inches, "becomes limited to human biases about light and dark and—"

"Can it, Emery," Akako snapped, getting to her feet. "Nobody here needs a lesson about time in space, especially from you."

Andre stood up too. "I'm headed to bed. Coming?" he asked London.

She got to her feet as well and took his hand, and together they left the room by the emergency exit door opposite the main door where Bardox stood. They were quickly followed by Bella Morte, Akako and Helmet, who all preferred to exit that way than pass too close to Professor Claude Bardox.

As Renata started out the main door, which Bardox had taken possession of, he demanded, "I need a shuttle. Immediately. You will accompany me to the docking bay."

Renata stopped dead and rotated her shaved, tattooed head slowly in his direction, fixing him with piercing hazel eyes. Bardox couldn't help but see the muscles in her neck grow taut. "Well, that's not my department, is it Bardox? You'll have to wake Felicity. In case you've forgotten, there are only two crewmembers authorized to drive the shuttles, unless it's an emergency, and I don't see this as an emergency. The other authorized pilot, in case you've forgotten that too, is Bill. He's also sleeping, despite the relativity of time in space. That's where I'm headed, to sleep, unless you've got any other questions about who does what on this station."

"Your sarcasm is poorly phrased and unappreciated," Bardox began, but Renata disappeared out the door and he was left alone

with Emery.

"What a cretin!" Emery yelled, but not quite loud enough for Renata to hear him, or at least he hoped not. "What will we do, Claude?" the younger man said, in a voice that showed how ineffective he felt when doors slammed in his face.

Bardox, who hated anyone using his first name, scowled at his assistant. "Go wake Felicity. We've got to get to Planet #666 now. The body of Jason X is there, I'm sure of it. That's where he crashed. We've must find him before anyone else encounters his remains, and well before a search party is sent out for the missing crew of *The Revival*." He paused for effect, the silence binding Emery to him, as if the younger man was tethered by a rope. "Jason X will be my greatest experiment."

"Yes," Emery said.

"My finest work. My *pièce de résistance*!"

"The world will bow at your feet."

"I will change the world of genetics in ways no one else can even imagine!"

"You're a genius, sir, a mind dazzling as a sun, with twice the power. Unique. One of a kind. Mankind, common and simple as it is, is lucky to have you to lead the way."

"Indeed," Bardox said, accepting the praise as his due. "The wretched masses shall develop in a manner they had not hitherto anticipated, and be the better for it!"

His self-satisfied look lasted a moment or two. Then he looked down at his fan club of one and commanded, "What are you waiting for? Go! Quickly. Wake the pilot. There's no time to lose."

Emery took off in the direction of the sleeping quarters for the non-science crew, filled with the fire of a mission.

Bardox, knowing the clout he held, felt assured the pilot would complain but would be dressed and ready in short order. He exited the room and took the elevator in the hallway down from deck two to deck four, then walked the short hallway to the elevator that descended from the station via cables down to the shuttle bay. That deck had been designed to be separate from the main station, for safety purposes. All the better, Bardox thought, for one never knew

what precious items one might discover and bring back from a planet.

TWO

Felicity stirred fitfully in her bunk, both unable and unwilling to wake from the sleep that had been so hard to come by for the last two weeks, ever since Stanislav's ship had fallen out of orbit and crashed into Planet #666.

The pounding broke through her wish-fulfillment dream: *she and Fedor were making love on a blue beach, on Earth II. His hands roamed the curves of her breasts, stopping to excite each nipple, one after the other, then one hand found its way down, past her diaphragm, beyond her bellybutton and her stomach, through the soft mound of her most vulnerable area and up inside her—*

"Ms Lawrence! I know you're in there. Answer your door now!" Emery's high, hideously pathetic voice jolted her fully awake. For several moments she felt alright, then the gloom of grief settled over her again.

More pounding, and the buzzer, more yelling. "I'm coming!" she snarled over the ruckus, donning a robe and wiping sleep from her eyes.

She opened the door to find the wimpy assistant to Bardox, all gangly limbs and pale skin, scowling at her, his knuckles white from pounding on her door, his features steeped in frustration.

A sniveling wimp if ever one existed, she thought. Bardox's sidekick apparently loved being kicked in the side just to bask in the "great" man's shadow, and Felicity usually felt more than willing to accommodate him!

"What can I do for you at..." She turned her head as the digital clock on her wall lit up, "...at five in the morning."

"Time is relative—" Emery began.

Felicity held up a hand, palm right in his face to stifle his monologue, close enough to imply a threat of violence.

"Professor Bardox requires transportation immediately to Planet #666."

Felicity shook her head to clear it further. "What's the emergency?"

"He has important scientific research to conduct there and it is crucial that we arrive within two hours."

"Okay, this sounds wacked," she said. "What could he be doing that needs to be done right now?"

"We must find the wreckage of *Black Star 13*."

"Now? Why? Any plants they had onboard would be the same ones we have on the station, or we'd know about already, so why would you want to find those? To clone?"

"We don't have to explain ourselves," Emery the weasel said, and Felicity began to shut the door in his face.

"Ms Lawrence. You are an engineer. Professor Bardox does not understand your job, although he could. Nor does he want to, nor does he question what you deem urgent. He and I are scientists. Please do us the courtesy of admitting you do not understand the intricacies of the cloning process, and kindly do not question our work or its urgency! This is an emergency."

"Great imitation," she said, and Emery looked confused. She sighed and began to close the door. "Give me a minute to dress."

"Professor Bardox said we should rendezvous at the shuttle bay and—" But the door cut off the rest.

Felicity splashed water on her face and the solar panel dried it as she dressed in a tan engineer's jumpsuit, tailored by her to accentuate the dips and rises along her body, not that this would be necessary for either Bardox or, God help her, Emery.

She could have refused, but she wanted a reason to go to Planet #666, and she didn't know she had that need until the opportunity asserted itself in the unlikely form of Bardox and Peterson, the last two on the station she would normally do a favor for.

She grabbed her belt, which contained digital diagnostic tools she might need in addition to what was on the shuttle itself, and paused for a moment. She should let her brother, Bill, know where she was headed. And maybe London, since she was theoretically second in command on the station, not that Bardox allowed anybody but himself to have any say. She could leave voice messages, but, on the other hand, maybe this wasn't necessary. Maybe she didn't want

anyone to know where she was headed. The log on the main computer would be enough.

As she walked along the dimly lit, quiet corridors of the station towards the elevator that would take her to deck four, she thought about Stanislav. Hope, she realized, springs eternal. And the saner part of her knew he was dead. How could he not be? The tape made it clear that someone had boarded *The Revival* and attacked him. The ship spun out of orbit, out of control because it was hooked to *Black Star 13* and all *The Revival's* power couldn't have landed two ships. But even if they had managed to land rather than crash, it was highly unlikely—even if there were survivors—that they would have been anything but mortally wounded. From the verbal logs they picked up, Fedor would have died long before the crash.

After the shock of *The Revival's* crash, the station's bridge crew had, of course, scanned Planet #666's surface and found no life signs. They even tried the more primitive heat-finder that Bill had made—what he called infrared a tool from the Stone Age, but at least it confirmed what they knew.

Despite all this, some part of Felicity wanted to see for herself. She wanted to find that ship, find Fedor's body. She wanted a conclusion to her grief. And frankly, she didn't want anyone to know she was shuttling to the surface because she didn't want anyone thwarting the mission that would give her a chance to search.

She reached deck four and took the elevator down to the shuttle bay to find Bardox and Emery suited up and sitting in one of the shuttles waiting for her. Lordy, she thought, these two. It was like dealing with an idiot and a savant, but which one was which?

Felicity walked into the glass room, suited up for space, and manipulated the control panel so that the button on the wall that opened the bay door to space would be delayed long enough for her to get into the shuttle and close it tight. She also punched in the departure info for the station's computer log.

"Is that necessary?" Bardox called from the doorway of the shuttle, his voice loud as it came through the com button in his space suit's helmet, and reverberated inside her own.

"Don't shout," she said, not even bothering to turn around. "And yes, it's necessary. Why, is there some reason I shouldn't record this?"

He paused, a tad too long she thought. "Of course not. I'm just eager to be on our way. Time is crucial to this experiment."

"Right!" Felicity sighed and finished punching in the codes, then confirmed them verbally as a standard backup procedure. Then she pressed the button on the timer for the bay door.

She entered the shuttle to find both Bardox and Emery belted up. One less reason to talk to them, she thought, taking a seat in the navigator's chair at the navigational panels, wondering how insulted they would be if she closed the wall behind the captain's chair that blocked off the rest of the shuttle and would separate her from them, deciding that much as she'd like to, it wasn't a good idea politically. After all, Bardox was head of the station, technically.

With another sigh, she sealed the shuttle door, pressed in the code to unlock the vessel from its moorings on the shuttle pad, did a systems check, then pulled the navigational stick so the shuttle was nose to nose with the large door already sliding up to the roof of the bay and opening the room to space. She said, for the benefit of Bardox and Emery, "Bay door opening!" although that was obvious on the image monitor. The air was sucked out of the shuttle bay as the door went up and back along the ceiling, allowing as much room as possible for shuttles to depart or enter. Only minimal power was needed because of the draw from space; she just needed to steer. That could be done automatically but Felicity had always preferred the control of manual steering.

The shuttle floated up and out the door and into the blackness on its own. Once they were well clear of the doorway and far enough from the station, and the image monitor told her that the bay's door was closed, she cranked up the power; the bay would automatically fill with life-sustaining air.

Felicity drove the vehicle around the station to the other side. Below her, through the pinhole that opened outside the shuttle as a window she saw in real time a large black dot against space that surrounded it. Planet #666 was so named not because of its extreme

darkness but because that was the next number in the listing of discovered planetary bodies. But it was an appropriate name.

As they headed straight towards Planet #666, Felicity switched navigation to autopilot. Normally she would have advised her passengers that they could remove their seatbelts until the shuttle began to enter the planet's atmosphere, but she wanted as little conversation as possible between her and these two. And in fact they said nothing to her, presuming that they also wanted little contact. Or perhaps they just saw her as some lackey, too lowdown in their hierarchy to bother with other than as a means for getting what they needed. Either way, she enjoyed the peace, peering through the pinhole that gave her a chance to once again inhale the beauty of space, with its countless numbers of red, blue, yellow and white twinkling stars, and solid-light, multi-colored planets that let her feel for a few moments that eternity was important, non-threatening, and that life might continue after death, for all anyone knew. That she might again find Fedor—

Bardox's command to Emery broke into her revelry. "Hand me the case." She heard shifting behind her and presumably Emery was complying with the demand of his master. "Open it." A small smile came to her lips, thinking of a visual she'd seen from Bill's collection—how he loved acquiring antiques from the twenty-first through the twenty-third centuries. It was what they called a "movie" and showed a mad scientist and his weirdly hideous slave Igor who said repeatedly, "Yes master!" and "No master!" He was frequently rewarded for his loyalty with insults at best and floggings at worst. Yes, she loved the image of Bardox flogging Emery!

Before leaving G7, Felicity completed a scan of the planet using the station's more sophisticated computer equipment. She'd fed the coordinates into the shuttle's computer. As they neared the planet, ready to enter its orbit, Felicity locked onto the three-dimensional image of *The Revival* which she had positioned at those coordinates.

"Brace yourselves," she cautioned her passengers. "Entering orbit."

The turbulence of the planet's outer layer rocked the shuttle mercilessly, almost flipping it on its head. Behind her, she could hear small dog-like yips coming from Emery. Felicity switched from

autopilot back to manual control to try to steady the small vessel. It took her a few moments to feel out the disturbance and roll with it and meanwhile the shuttle was buffeted by the winds.

Finally she got it under control, only to hear Emery's squeaky voice snap, "Can't you control this thing better than that?"

Steamed, Felicity spun around in her seat. "Would you like to get out and walk?"

She faced front again and drove the shuttle smoothly through the ring of gases and space debris that made up the strata between space and the dark world below. The small shuttle suffered another round of attacks from the invisible forces but then they broke through and were hurtling down towards the dark surface that loomed closer and closer with every passing second. The surface reminded Felicity of surgery she'd had to correct a problem with both corneas. In the femtosecond when the eye surgeon temporarily removed the and corneal flaps over her pupils, she had experienced a black darker than any black she had previously imagined. That's what Planet #666 was like, and that blackness was about to swallow them.

"We're going to crash!" Emery shouted, his voice hysterical.

"Not if I can help it," Felicity snarled, using the computer's image monitor to scan the terrain below that she could not risk looking at through the pinhole. Finally it found the preferred landing spot and she set the navigational coordinates.

"Hold on," she said. "This will be a bumpy landing."

And it was. But eventually the shuttle touched firmament. Felicity hit the reverse thrusters, and finally the shuttle glided to a halt.

She took in a big breath and exhaled loudly, cracking her neck inside the helmet from side to side to loosen the tension. This was only the third time she'd landed on this dreary planet's surface and each time it had been the same. Rock and roll, as they said back in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It was not a planet she liked and she would prefer never to have to come here again. Its only draw was that she might, with some luck, find Fedor.

Even before she opened the door, Bardox and Emery were out of their seats and eager to depart. "*The Revival* is out the door to the left." In fact, it was to the right, but she couldn't help herself.

Anything to torment those two, she thought. She sometimes wondered at her sick humor. Fedor had said he loved that in her.

Bardox grunted general disapproval as he and Emery quickly disembarked. Meanwhile, Felicity smiled to herself, counted to twenty, and got up to disembark as well.

Once she exited the shuttle, she watched Bardox and Emery staggering along the dark, dusty soil. As much as she enjoyed the torture she was inflicting, she knew she might as well get them back here now, otherwise she'd have to go find them later.

"This way," she called, when they had gone about a quarter of a mile. They turned and headed in her direction. When they reached her she said, "It's to the right. Who knew?"

Clearly from their faces they believed that she did. She stifled a laugh, but inside she was howling, until she turned. She saw the remains of *The Revival*.

The ship was in a million pieces, littered across the barren landscape as far as the eye could see. This planet had no moon and starlight was not nearly enough to guide them. Each of the three had hand-held lights, plus additional lights at the front of their helmets, and all six lights barely licked the gloom. But the sight of so much rubble that had once been an enormous space ship that had held about one hundred and fifty human beings, one of them Fedor, was sufficient for her heart to sink.

The computer had identified the ship, but really it was the largest bulk or wreckage it pinpointed. She saw a piece that had part of one word still visible, where the hull had miraculously not burned up as it entered the atmosphere: evil.

"We depart in one hour. Synchronize watches," she said, hearing the flatness of her voice.

"That's impossible," Bardox snapped. "We hardly have time to find the remains."

"What remains?"

His tone cooled. "Plant remains, of course. We need more time."

"Sorry, we don't have it. The suits have a four-hour capacity, give or take, and I don't want to push it."

Bardox paused. "We will rendezvous here in one hour."

Something in his tone disturbed her. "Alright, but be here. I take off in one hour and fifteen, and if you're not here, you're left behind."

"Understood."

He and Emery walked away from her, stumbling along in the dust that ballooned around their feet, heading in a direction that seemed to be where the least of the wreckage lay. Whatever their stupid mission, she had her own, and that was to sift through all this, looking for, hoping to locate something, anything that spoke of Fedor. Space suits were designed so that if one part was breached, the rest would close off automatically. The arm could be sucked out, but the rest of the body left intact, as the shoulder would close off the breach. With such a massive collision, there was little likelihood of many body parts remaining. And even as she tromped through the rubble and located horrifying remains like crushed hands and feet still entrapped in gloves and shoes, battered and bloody torsos decaying in the body of the suit, or suit segments flattened as the contents had been sucked through tears and rips, she knew this was a mission impossible. How could she find him? All she knew was that he had been in the cargo hold. She'd tried to get the computer to even best-guess the location, but it could not, and there was an almost one hundred percent chance that crew members were hurled far from their last-known position on impact. There was nothing to do but walk through the grim wreckage and hope to stumble upon something, anything, that would let her put closure to this pain.

Bardox moved as quickly as the heavy, bulky space suit would allow him to, heading in the preordained direction where the remains were pinpointed by his personal high-powered computer.

"We're to the right a few meters, sir," Emery said, panting for breath from the struggle of walking this harsh terrain, holding the digital compass before his helmet visor,

"Then we'll alter course," Bardox told him, a pilot with a questionable crew of one.

They moved a few meters over as they proceeded until Emery shouted, "Here, sir. We're almost there! We've almost found—"

"Yes, Emery, your exuberance is understandable at finding the plants we seek. I doubt, though, that you need to shout it so loudly. After all, the shuttle pilot..." he would not refer to her by name if he could help it, "is listening to all this and I'm sure she does not wish to be annoyed further."

Emery felt guilty, and knew he looked it. He had almost exposed their secret, forgetting that the com units in their helmets were all on the same frequency, and certainly could be picked up from the space station, should anyone be listening. Presumably whoever was assigned to the bridge today was not listening or he/she would have been in contact. Likely they had fallen asleep—that's what he did when it was his shift, since there was nothing to do. In space, little changed from hour to hour.

The two continued on the route to where the hand-held compass identified the goal by a small red dot that blinked at them, and a smaller blue dot that identified the whereabouts of the holder. "Another few yards, sir," Emery said, his voice sailing, and Bardox scowled at him. Finally, "Here we are."

What they encountered was not space ship wreckage, but a life form, or what had once been a life form, remarkably intact. Lying prone, half covered by the backup fuselage of either *The Revival* or *Black Star 13*, they saw arms, legs and part of a torso. The top of the torso and the head were under a sheet of metal.

Bardox took in a breath to speak, and then censored himself, aware that Felicity could hear every word and would come running at the first signal that anything unusual was going on. Using great restraint, his elation in check, he said in his normal command voice, "Emery, help me move this debris."

Emery took one side of the heavy, burnt fuselage, Bardox the other, and together they struggled with the enormous tank that held the miniature reactor that every ship carried, which held the nuclear energy that would be used as backup fuel if the main fuel source for a ship failed.

"What's all that groaning?" It was Felicity's voice, and Bardox waved at Emery to cease all movements for a moment.

"We're attempting to move some debris in order to reach our specimen."

"Need help?"

"No, thank you. We've just about finished."

Bardox signaled a "shush" sign to Emery by placing a finger before his lips encased in the helmet's visor, and they continued their unpleasant task of heavy lifting which neither scientist was used to and certainly not in shape for. Finally, they managed to slide and drag the material far enough to expose the entire body.

They stood together for a moment, breathing heavily, staring down at their prize: Jason X.

Bardox felt enraptured. "This is the most remarkable specimen I have ever encountered." His voice held a delight that he could not, would not contain. "What we are seeing here, Emery, is the future. This will align my name with that of Einstein, Hawkins, Chin Mai, Leblanc..."

His reverie broke when Felicity said, "Sounds like quite the plant. I should come have a look."

Damn meddlesome woman. Always wanting to stick her nose in where it was not wanted. But Bardox was a scientist who had a working knowledge of many sciences, including psychology

"Tell me, Felicity," he said, using her name intentionally, "is there any sign of anyone you knew from *The Revival's* crew? Perhaps the captain? What was his name again?"

Felicity was silent for several seconds. Then came a small, "No. Not yet."

"I'd think that searching for any remains would be a worthwhile endeavor. If we could identify the captain—Stanislav was his name, was it not?—then the records would be somewhat complete."

"Probably." Her voice sounded flat. Defeated. He knew she would keep searching.

Bardox motioned for Emery to open the surgical steel lab box they had brought with them. Inside were the tools of their trade, cloning, and Bardox removed simple scrapers, and the infusion/exfusion tool

that could remove DNA from the inside of a body, or implant it within a body, depending. Bardox motioned for Emery to scrape away clothing, hair and skin in a specific area and when he was finished, Bardox took the device in his good right hand, and inserted it under the metallic shield and deep into Jason X's crotch, into his testicles. He pressed a button on the end and the tool quickly extracted cells that would contain the DNA of this superhuman being. Meanwhile, Emery was relegated to the task of taking fingernail and hair samples, and scraping epithelial tissue into sterile tubes.

"Time, gentlemen," Felicity announced. "Make your way back to the shuttle now for departure."

"We're on our way," Bardox said, not hurrying in the slightest until another five minutes had elapsed and he was satisfied with the samples taken.

Emery crouched down and packed the tools back into the lab box, storing the vials of samples into their special case, and then he joined Bardox in standing.

"We have done well, Emery. Today is the start of a new era for mankind. We shall see nothing short of a revolution—"

"Are you two heading back to the shuttle, or what?" Felicity asked in a strained voice. "Because if you aren't, get your asses back here now. The power source is already fired up and we need to get out of here before the oxygen runs out."

Bardox ignored her and stared at the case as if he had X-ray vision and could see the contents, and beyond them, into the future and how those samples would be used.

Eventually, they turned back towards the shuttle, ignoring warnings from Felicity that they were late, that she was about to take off without them, which Bardox was certain would not happen. Finally they reached the shuttle with the help of their homing device only half an hour late.

Felicity met them with the full force of her fury. Never one to mince words, she said, "Look, jerkoffs, we have a schedule to keep. I have to get us off this planet in thirty minutes and back onto the station or we will suffocate. Are you both stupid, or just dense?"

"If it is so urgent that we leave immediately, perhaps you might make preparations for takeoff," Bardox interrupted, in an infuriatingly haughty voice.

Felicity swallowed her anger, knowing that actions spoke louder than words right now. She flipped all the switches and pressed all the buttons that would secure the shuttle, and aimed the nose along a path that the computer could find. Still, the road was rocky, but they were airborne within moments, ascending as they sped above the planet's surface, back up and away from the absolute darkness and towards the sky littered with bright lights, like dots of hope calling to them. Exiting the planet's protective atmosphere was another rocky road and Felicity, in her fury, made little effort to stabilize the shuttle, just enough that they wouldn't flip out of control. She wanted to make sure her passengers got the ride they deserved.

For her efforts, she heard retching behind her and knew it must be Emery who had thrown up. Once she had cleared the barrier and had the shuttle gliding through space, she turned to find the inside of the pipsqueak's visor filled with a yellow-green substance, and his eyes horrified. Bardox stared at his assistant, clearly repulsed. Felicity turned back, smiling to herself, but wished it was Bardox who had vomited; the man seemed invincible. "We'll be back soon, hopefully before your oxygen runs out in, oh, another ten minutes," she said, but she kept the speed aligned with the remaining oxygen time in the suits, just to make them sweat a little. Let at least one of these idiots—and now she decided there was no savant on board—let them worry as long as possible.

The shuttle docked with less than thirty seconds to spare. Felicity was up and out of the cabin the moment the bay door closed and the environmental conditions that sustained human life had been reinstituted in the bay. She threw her helmet to one side, sick of all this, of Bardox and his urgencies, of Emery and his asinine attitudes. Sick of all the death she had seen on Planet #666; sick of the fact that she did find Stanislav, only a part of him. Enough to recognize the ring he always wore.

She had cried silent tears over the debris, feeling hopeless about finding anything at all of him. And then, out of the blue, something

shiny caught her eye. Even as she moved towards it, she knew what it was.

The glove that half-hid the ring was empty of the hand, which had obviously vaporized. She stooped and scooped up the jewelry, staring at it with disbelief. It was Stanislav's ring. She remembered them together, in bed, after particularly good sex. They had been laying face to face, his arm around her shoulder, with his other hand on her hip. That's when she first noticed the ring.

"From my days at flight academy," he said as she traced the embossed design of a space ship, part of the insignia. "I don't know why but it's the most precious thing I own. I guess because I had to work so hard to get it."

"The things that we work for are usually the best in the end."

"Yes," he said, touching her hair, her face, kissing her lips gently. "I know that."

Suddenly he pulled the ring from his finger. "Here. Why don't you wear this for a while."

"No," she said. "I mean, I'd love to, but I couldn't. Not yet... It's... too soon."

He had slipped the ring back onto his finger, a look of hurt in his eyes.

She knew what that ring meant and what offering it meant, and felt guilt for rejecting it. And she didn't want to reject it. Him. But, she needed to be sure.

"When you're back from redirecting *Black Star 13*, ask me again," she said.

He smiled, with that gleam in his eyes. "I will." And they had made love again.

When she found the ring in the soil of Planet #666, she had cried uncontrollably, but silently, clutching it to her body, regretting that she had ever wanted to wait. She had never had the chance to accept the ring. To tell Fedor what he meant to her. And now she never would.

She used a piece of metal to dig into the dusty soil and buried the glove in a shallow grave. The ring she placed into the leg pocket of

her space suit. She had rejected it. Now she would have it for the rest of her life. Without the man on whose finger it belonged.

As she stormed from the shuttle bay, fury and despair vied for her attention. She just wanted to get to her quarters and sob at her own pace, loudly, in her own way.

Bardox, already out of his suit which he left lying on the floor near the shuttle, followed her to the door that would let them into the corridor, Emery behind, still in the space suit minus helmet, struggling to wipe away what had so recently been inside his stomach, most of which had dripped to the floor of the shuttle bay.

The door suddenly swooshed open and the security team of Renata and Helmet stood on the other side, both with fists on hips, looking menacing. Renata said, "Felicity, you're in breach of the station's protocol. This is an unauthorized use of a shuttle, and an unauthorized trip to a planet."

Felicity piped up in her own defense. "It wasn't unauthorized. Bardox wanted to go to the planet to get a sample of—"

"That's irrelevant," Renata said. "Outside an emergency, any use of a shuttle and any landing on a planet is covered by Earth II rule, number 1707, which specifically states that two officers or the head of the station must—"

"I know what the fucking rule says," Felicity snapped, feeling the tension in her escalating to a dangerous level.

"If you'll excuse me, ladies," Bardox brushed past them with his case clutched in his good arm, the artificial hand gripping the handle for added security.

"Bardox authorized this," Felicity said. "He said it was an emergency."

Bardox, the freshly wiped Emery now beside him, turned with a look of surprise on his face. "Hardly, Ms Lawrence. And while cloning of a specimen is my work, it would hardly qualify as an emergency. I merely stated I wished to gather a sample for a cloning experiment immediately. It was your decision to grant my request, or not."

"But Emery said—"

"Emery, did you tell Ms Lawrence this was an emergency?"

Emery, looking guilty, and still green around the gills, lowered his eyes and said, "N—no."

Felicity's mouth dropped open.

"Well, there you have it. Ms Lawrence was obviously mistaken in her assumption. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall let the troops sort this out between yourselves. I have work to do."

Bardox headed up the corridor towards the elevator, Emery tagging behind, leaving Felicity, Renata and Helmet staring after them.

Finally, Felicity turned back to the others. "Renata, honestly, he told me it was an emergency."

"Look, I don't doubt that. But even so, that still doesn't explain why you failed to leave word with any other crewmember of your mission, another aspect of the rules of shuttle use. I had to scan the navigational and communication logs to find out where you landed."

"We should toss her in the brig," Helmet said, relishing the idea of having a prisoner on board, a first.

Renata ignored him. "Fortunately for you, I found that you'd not only logged in that the mission was considered an emergency by Bardox, but the prick actually used the same scam with me."

"Hell, he got me out of bed for it—"

"And I sent him to you."

"But why? If you knew it wasn't an emergency—"

"Because driving a shuttle is not in my job description. It's in yours, and it's up to you to say no to the man. None of this excuses your part in this."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"What?" Helmet cried. "She broke the rules"

"I said no," Renata repeated.

"But, we're required by—"

"This infraction and its punishments are within the discretion of the head of security and that's me."

Then she said to Felicity, "You won't be taken to the brig, but you are restricted to your quarters until I investigate further. And I'm filing a report which will appear in your record."

Renata turned on her heels with the scowling Helmet following after her, assuring Felicity, "You're lucky. Don't press it!"

Felicity stood alone in the doorway. Her shoulders dropped from fatigue, from sadness, from the temporarily spent fury of having Bardox and Emery set her up. Even as she walked to her quarters, she was calculating payback for the cloning specialist and his repulsive Igor. But first she needed some grieving time, and restriction to quarters was not so bad, under the circumstances. It was more than she had hoped for.

She took the ring from her suit pocket and looked at it, her eyes blurring with tears.

THREE

Claude Bardox strode briskly through the doorway that opened at his approach and into the secret laboratory annexed to his personal quarters, Emery close on his heels. "We've no time to waste," he was saying, infusing the room with the urgency he felt.

He deposited the lab case gently onto the sterile workstation then ordered Emery, "Open it at once, and then bring me a re-synthesizer and two vials."

While Emery did the menial tasks, Bardox sat at his personal computer and ran numbers. By his best estimates, the temperature of the planet varied between zero and minus 196 Celsius—absolute zero. Taking into account the peculiar mixture of ground gasses that were composed in good part of freezing nitrogen, blended with a strangely hot freon-type gas new to him, anything not instantly vaporized was left almost cryonically suspended. That blend of gasses, on contact with objects like rocks, soil, and certainly the debris of the wreckage, including the bodies, normally first formed a protective layer around the object. Then, in a fraction of a second, obviously affected by something, but what he did not know, the protective layer exploded and with it, the object itself. Bardox believed the enormous amount of dust on Planet #666 was composed of these exploded, vaporized particles. But some objects remained intact, for no reason that he could yet fathom, for instance, the debris from the two ships, parts of space suits, and the body of Jason X. That his corpse had withstood the assault of the planet's gasses was nothing short of a miracle. His body, flash-frozen, should have vaporized, but it did not, leading to hope that his tissue might survive indefinitely, or at least for the duration of Bardox's experiment.

Emery had the re-synthesizer on the table and set up for work. Carefully he removed the vials of tissue taken from Jason X and sorted them into the various types of cells from which those samples had been derived. He submerged each vial into a pocket of liquid suspension that penetrated glass inside the re-synthesizer. With

temperature and stability maintained, Bardox hooked up the computer to analyze the contents of each vial. He watched the digits race across the screen in two directions for several seconds, then finally stop. He scanned the list. Over and over he saw: "INVALID DNA." But finally he came to words that set his heart beating faster: "VIABLE DNA."

"Perfect," he cried.

"Only one vial is good," Emery said, stating the obvious.

"That hardly matters. What is important is that we have one. And there's no time to lose here, Emery. Even a fraction of a degree of difference in temperature or a fragment of time or even some element we have not yet identified could cost us dearly."

Using a specialized tool that could work through the glass of the vial without shattering it, Bardox extracted half the sample taken from Jason X's testicles. Through the tool's small sterile suction hose he brought the half sample through the tube and into the glass box that held the re-synthesizer. Once the sample was in place, Bardox slipped his fleshy hand and his artificial hand into the gloves that were inside the glass box on each side and utilized the tiny tools attached to the fingers to work on the bits of flesh, dissecting them so that he could find the deepest tissue.

"Bring me the magnifying glasses," he told Emery, who brought over the powerful lenses that expanded reality fifty times. He placed the glasses by their strap over Bardox's head and pulled them down in front of his eyes.

Much of the material looked corrupted to Bardox but that could not be. The computer said the DNA was viable. And Jason X had been alive when his body was placed into the rocket. That he'd read in one of the secret reports he'd managed to steal from the hidden archives, with the help of a former student, a rather plain girl who had been smitten with him since she trained under him. He'd persuaded her of the importance of this information and she—being employed at Earth II's locked science archives—managed to scan the contents of the buried files with an old-fashioned X-ray machine attached to a computer scanner. Clever! The girl had been bright, in

her own way, although she had a rather docile nature. At least Emery could speak on his own behalf, although not often competently.

As Bardox worked, he felt the tissue was almost fighting him. What a strange concept, a clump of cells with a mind of its own... that could not be! Yet the challenge was its own inspiration. This was taking longer and proving harder than it should have, but he made allowances for the severely frozen state and the elements to which the tissue had been subjected.

While he worked, Bardox talked, and Emery loved not only hearing his ideas but even his voice, so rich and powerful and certain of his goals in an uncertain world.

"What we have here is DNA from the most unique specimen of humanity ever produced. Jason X is perfection. Every report indicates that his body was modified to withstand damage that no other human being is capable of withstanding.

"The centuries-old papers from Earth written by Doctor Lowe on Jason X were not destroyed as we were all led to believe, but they were sealed and I—"

"How did you gain access, sir?"

"I have my connections," Bardox chuckled, and Emery knew this for the exceptionally good and generous mood that it was, for normally Bardox answered few questions put to him by his assistant.

"Those reports—although the science of the twenty-first century is hardly what we would deem science today—stated that a new experimental technology had been implanted into Jason X, what was called by the military "nano ants"—a quaint and evocative term. We are, of course, all familiar with nanotechnology. What makes this different is that these ants were new at the time, implanted into the body to remain permanently, a bit like an ongoing internal hospital. Of course, that work would need to fail. Human beings are pathetically fragile and the fact that biology can alter so drastically from day to day based on silly shifts in hormones, blood pressure, cholesterol levels, body and air temperature, bacterial and viral infections, even the environment, not to mention mood, all of it makes an implant like the nano ants pointless unless they could adapt to constantly changing conditions. Now, ants that are

programmed to do their work then dissolve, that would be a breakthrough and take nanotechnology a giant step into the future. Alas, mortal minds are not only weak but conservative, and such a concept has apparently not occurred to the technological dullards who use not even the one-tenth of the human brain accessed by even the most simplistic of Homo sapiens, and it is not difficult to see why —"

"Security to Professor Bardox."

Bardox hissed, "What does she want now? Get rid of her."

Emery pressed his personal com button. "Emery Peterson here. Who's calling?"

"Renata Henderson here," came the snide response, implying that with only eleven people on the station, there was little need for formality; he knew perfectly well who she was. "Let me speak with Bardox."

Emery looked at Bardox who shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but the professor is asleep."

"I find that hard to believe. He was gung ho to get to his lab and start an experiment. What did you bring back to the station?"

Emery looked frightened for a moment, and his eye twitched. Bardox mouthed, "Plants."

"Plants!" Emery yelled, as if this were the answer to a question that would make him rich beyond his wildest dreams. Or damn him to hell.

"There are no plants on #666."

"No. I mean yes. But they were in the *Black Star 13* wreckage."

What a fool, Bardox thought. Obviously he would need to deal with this, as he dealt with everything. "Miss Henderson. Renata," he said smoothly, "I am working as we speak, and you are hindering my experiment with your questions. We went for organic material, as I informed you, and have brought organic material back. What is your problem?"

"My problem, Professor Bardox, is that you used a shuttle for a non-emergency—"

"Yes, well, we've been over that—"

"—and brought back organic material which you have yet to either identify or log into the station's records. We cannot have any material brought aboard that will contaminate the environment on the station."

"Do you think that I of all people am unaware of safety procedures?" Bardox snapped. "I will log the entry as soon as I can. The sample is perfectly safe and is contained. Now if you will excuse me, I have timely work to occupy me, as I'm certain you must as well."

He nodded at Emery, and the assistant pressed the com button to disconnect, his face filled with guilt.

"Insufferable, interfering Neanderthal. This experiment is crucial and we have little time to extract the DNA. The sample has been frozen and deterioration is taking place as we speak. The entire planet of Earth was destroyed by minds as backward as her. Dammit." His metallic fingers did not have the precision of flesh and blood and the tool slipped, crushing part of the tiny sample.

"Sir, what is it?"

"Nothing, Peterson. Nothing that concerns you." But Bardox realized that he would be unable to salvage anything from this half of the sample and that another slip of the hand would destroy what he had worked so hard to acquire.

He forced himself to alter the tone of his voice. "Emery, you need practice. Take over."

The assistant looked stunned. "Sir, you mean I can extract the DNA—"

"Of course that's what I mean. Get to it!"

Bardox slipped his hands out of the gloves and Emery slipped his in. He felt thrilled, honored. At last Professor Bardox was recognizing his potential. To be entrusted with this task that was so important—

"Be careful, you idiot," Bardox snapped. "We need undamaged material. Look what you've done."

Emery looked up and then looked down. Somehow he had managed to crush most of the sample. How had that happened? He'd

barely grasped the instruments. He didn't even remember touching them to the sample yet. "Sir, I'm sorry, I don't know how—"

"It's alright, Peterson. You're just learning," Bardox said, but the edge to his voice left Emery feeling guilty and incompetent. "We will proceed. Work with the other half of the sample."

When Emery had managed to bring the second half of the sample through the tube and separate a bit of cellular material that seemed less decayed than the rest, he carefully placed it onto a glass disc, and then removed his hands from the gloves. Bardox immediately pressed a button and a lid fitted, airtight, over the disc, spinning as it went down, locking in the material in a sterile environment for DNA extraction, and for further analysis.

Bardox set the computer to the task and while they waited Emery prepared a concoction of vitamins and minerals and blended it with liquid chlorophyll, the beverage that both he and Bardox drank daily to supply their bodies with essential nutrients. Bardox believed that eating was a waste of time, a human frailty he refused to indulge in. Nutrients, that's what was needed, and drinking them in this efficient manner would provide all that he required. Emery had twigged to this logic immediately and had adopted the same habit. He rarely missed food, although sometimes he did long to chew.

"Sir," he said, handing over the large glass of the nutritious drink. "You need to replenish yourself."

"Thank you, Peterson." Bardox sat his glass on the lab counter and faced the computer, watching as the binary digits performed calculations that accompanied the process of extracting DNA from the sample.

"About those reports, sir. Did you find any useful information, primitive as it is?"

"Indeed. It was in the papers written by a Doctor Stein dated more recently—he also worked for the military—which describes tissue grafted from Jason X onto a soldier. The work is brilliant in one way, foolish in another, but then our science is light years ahead of the pseudo-science of the past. Stein had the notion that he could build a super-soldier, and did in fact create such a being. The reports are sketchy but I am under the impression that all did not go as planned

and that in the end the project met with failure. Perhaps the soldier did not survive, but I cannot say. Jason, however, did, as we know quite well. And he will live again through his DNA. Ah, the computer has completed its task."

Bardox turned to the beeping screen, only to find himself shocked beyond measure. The word "FAILURE" flashed across it.

"Report," he demanded.

"Unable to extract DNA," the computer voice told him.

"Why?"

"Sample corrupted."

Emery ducked his head as if he expected to be hit. Bardox glared at him.

"Corrupted how?"

"DNA unreadable."

Further annoyed, Bardox asked for an analysis and was given a long explanation that he cut somewhere about midway with a "Stop." The essence was that this sample was dead. Not just dead but too long dead.

"Postulate an alternative," he demanded of the computer's brain.

"Gather a sample using living tissue."

"Living tissue? Don't you think I would give my good arm for living tissue of Jason X?" Bardox paused a moment. Suddenly his fleshy arm swept out and the re-synthesizer, the samples, the DNA kit, the nutrient drink, all of it flew across the room, crashing against walls and furniture, glass shattering all over the place.

Emery backed up into a corner and cowered. He had seen Bardox angry before, but not this angry.

The great man said nothing. His face had turned exceptionally pale and for a moment Emery was concerned that he was suffering an aneurism. He stood with his hands on the lab table, the flesh and bone one bleeding where it had been cut, the other gripping the metal with its talon-like metallic fingers. He stared down at the table but obviously was looking into his own mind. Emery was disinclined to ask a question or to make a statement, even about his boss's health. Mainly he wanted to escape.

All at once, though, a thought came to Bardox and his expression changed completely, opening up with possibilities, bringing color back into his face and a spark into his eyes as he looked at Emery. "That's it, we will have a living sample."

"A—a living sample, sir? But... how?"

"We will reanimate Jason X, of course. Bring his body back to life. A bioscanner will reveal any cells still living and we will extract several samples this time, to ensure we have sufficient material of good quality to work with."

Bardox had regained his enthusiasm. "Bring me another drink, Emery. At once!"

Emery forced himself out of his locked-muscle state and went to the cupboard and with shaky hands prepared the professor another nutrient beverage. Once he had handed it over, Bardox drank it down fully.

"Yes, that was needed," Bardox said when he finished, wiping his lips with a napkin that Emery handed to him. "My brain can now function at a higher capacity."

Emery hated to ask, fearful of altering Bardox's newfound good mood, but he had to know. "Sir, doesn't your idea imply that we need to go back to Planet #666?"

"Indeed it does, Emery."

"But, sir, with Renata on our case, she'll be keeping tabs on us. How are we going to do this? No one will fly us down to the planet again."

"Then we'll fly ourselves."

"Fly a shuttle?" Emery's voice rose to a squeak as he said this. "Sir, we don't know how to fly a shuttle."

Bardox chuckled again, leaving Emery with conflicting emotions. "As you know, I possess an eidetic memory. I have committed to memory an image of every procedure involved with takeoff, navigation and landing that Felicity undertook. I will replicate her actions."

"But, sir..." Emery said tentatively, trying to grasp this idea that sounded suicidal to him, "we have no idea where to land."

"Ah, but we will! Emery, this is where you will assist me. You will go to the bridge immediately and determine the exact coordinates that were involved in our landing on Planet #666."

"I will?"

"Yes, of course you will. I assume you'll want your name on the paper I intend to write when my experiment has been successfully completed."

"Yes sir, I do. Very much so, but—"

"Emery, be logical. In order for that to occur, you will have to prove yourself a valuable assistant. So far, your sloppy handling of the sample does not encourage me to mention you."

Emery felt discouraged. And embarrassed. He still couldn't figure out how he'd destroyed that sample.

"You can redeem yourself, of course. Simply obtain the required information."

"But, how can I get—"

"Use charm."

"Charm?"

"Don't be a fool. You will use stealth. Steal the information. You know how to use the station's main computer. Go to the bridge and check the navigational logs. Ask it to display the coordinates."

"But... but there's always somebody assigned to the bridge, and my shift isn't for another two weeks. And I need clearance from whoever's in charge and I don't know if they'll give me clearance and —"

"I will give you clearance. Take this."

Bardox handed him a card with four letters written on it. "This is a universal code which will open any door and access any computer on the station."

Emery stared at the card as if it were the most precious material yet discovered in the universe. "How did you get—"

"Never mind how. Just memorize it and use the letters to access the computer."

"But somebody will be stationed on the bridge. What will I tell them if they—"

"Peterson, do I have to think for you? Go and do it. I don't care how; just get those coordinates. Now!"

Emery memorized the letters and handed the card back to Bardox. Then he hurried from Bardox's personal lab, his heart heavy. Normally he trusted the professor fully. But this seemed half crazy-reanimating a corpse to find a trace of still-living material for DNA that might not work. And he didn't even have a full grasp of Bardox's plans for the use of this DNA. He didn't want to end up in the brig, and that would be where he'd spend his time if they were caught stealing a shuttle.

On the other hand, whatever this project of Bardox's was, it was obviously big, or the doctor would not be so stressed, and so willing to take such exceptional risks. He said it would make history. Emery liked the notion that his name would be added to a long line of the famous in his field. That certainly appealed to him. It would bring him not only riches but also respect. And more, it would put him in a position where he could name his projects and the money to support them would flow like water on Earth II.

The side benefits would be innumerable. He might even have Akako on her knees before him, and then he'd send her packing. Well, maybe not, maybe he'd keep her around to amuse himself. Instead of her making a fool of him as she so often did, he would have the upper hand. He would deign whether to have her in his presence, or not, depending on his mood, and whatever other beauties vied for his attention. The universe would be his oyster. And really, they'd already been to Planet #666 and knew what to expect. This trip should be relatively risk free. They would not record the shuttle's departure, which had been a mistake last time, that and announcing their desire for a shuttle all over the station to everyone who would listen! Bardox was famous for his eidetic memory which created images that were stored in his brain like data in a computer, recording perfectly everything that he saw and heard. He would be able to pilot the shuttle. All Emery had to do was get the coordinates. He would manage. Somehow. He'd think of a way. A lot depended on it, in fact, his entire future depended on the success of this experiment.

He walked quickly, head held high. He knew he was up to the task.
At least, he hoped he was.

FOUR

"How could this be happening? I've seen him... it... with my own eyes. He used a metal spike to stake Aaron through the heart, as if he were a vampire. I watched him eviscerate Elizabeth. Her guts spilled out like sausages and the floor was painted with her blood. Then I saw him tear into Paola, with his hands, and with a huge knife. He stabbed her at flash-lightning speed; it must have been over fifty times. In the end her body became a pile of bloody ribbons. And all the while she screamed and screamed and I was too terrified to do anything at all to help. I just hid there, under the table in the mess hall, watching, hoping he wouldn't see me, praying that he would go away. Just go away. I'll never forget their face and I'll never stop hearing their screams of pain and terror as long as I live.

"I feel so guilty, but what can I do? What can anyone do? The entire crew must be gone; nobody answers my hails. There's just me.

"I waited four days, at least I think it was, but it could have been a week. I haven't eaten; there was food all around me, but I couldn't eat. I found a little water. Still, I'm dehydrated. Finally, when the screaming stopped and had for a long time, I crept out of my hiding place and somehow found my way to the bridge, sure he would be around every corner waiting for me, waiting with that knife.

"Now I'm trapped here. I don't know what to do, where to go. There's nothing to do. I can't pilot this ship myself, even if I knew how, and I don't, I'm just a cook. I know that the others sent messages out into space. If help was coming, they would be here by now. I don't think any help will arrive. Nobody will rescue me.

"I've decided to record this personal log, a log that will likely never be heard by a human being. If anybody does find this, please don't give it to my mother. I don't want her to know that I suffered. I don't want her to know how I died. Just tell her it looks like I died quickly. The ship exploded. Tell her anything, just don't tell her the truth.

"Why did we bring that fucking rocket onboard, with its malignant cargo? We scanned for life signs, there were none, how could we have known that it contained something... someone... I don't even know...

so lethal? It's too late for questions. There are no answers, just a very hopeless reality that I'm facing. Everything is lost. Everyone. I'm alone here, I'm sure of it. If I could just get to a shuttle, but that's impossible. Others tried it, I heard them calling in on the com system: I'm headed to shuttle bay seven. All crew left, join me.' Then 'he' appeared out of nowhere. He seems to be everywhere, or can get everywhere fast. It's like he has some animal instinct, a nose that smells human blood circulating in the body. Maybe there's more than one—what do I know? I'm just a lowly galley cook, third class. If the more tech types, the more physically fit crewmembers couldn't make it, what hope do I have? None. Absolutely none.

"Oh God, I can hear something outside the bridge door. I've got the impenetrable lock on it, but... what the? No, he can't be cutting through that metal. That's impossible! It's not supposed to happen. We were told at school the bridge is the only secure—

"Oh no, no! Please, mama, help me. God no!"

The scream that followed cut through London to her marrow. "Pause," she told the computer to give herself time to stop shaking before the last, short log. One more, then she'd be done with this horror, and her shift would soon be over too and she could hopefully get away from the mayhem and have a few hours of a semblance of normalcy.

She had listened to the fifty or so logs of both *Black Star 13* and *The Revival* over and over, since the ships had plummeted into Planet #666 two weeks ago. There were many recorded messages from *Black Star 13* that Stanislav had managed to send to the station before he and the remains of his boarding crew evacuated the derelict ship. Unfortunately, *Black Star 13*'s computer had corrupted most of the files. And it sent the last logs first and most of those were personal logs, from crew to loved ones. When both ships went down, everything that hadn't yet been transmitted had been lost. Not that London figured much more existed anyway. How many horrifying deaths could she have listened to?

She changed the sequence of the tapes, from first to last recorded, on both ships. Crewmembers had repeatedly sent similar messages, and officers logged in fragments of details. She was especially

interested in the tapes from *Black Star 13*, how the ship had found a small, unmanned rocket floating through space. They'd had a dispute on the bridge about bringing it aboard, but the captain believed they should check it out and she felt that leaving it in the cargo hold in containment until scanners had had a chance to advise what, if anything, was inside would be safe enough. Apparently she had been wrong.

All of this information came second hand. What London missed were the earliest logs, from the bridge. The captain's log. If only those logs had made it, she would know more about this rocket and its contents. What seemed clear to her was that whatever was aboard—which most of the crew called "he"—was a killing machine. It had devastated the entire one-hundred and ten-member crew so that when *The Revival* boarded her there was no one left alive, no one, but "he"—if it was alive to start with. With no vital signs recorded on *Black Star 13* from the station, or from *The Revival*, London could only use her imagination. "He" could have been a machine, maybe a robot, perhaps fashioned by the military, hardware gone awry—there were always rumors to that effect. Maybe they weren't so paranoid after all. "He" could also have been a virus, something unknown that affected the body in such a way as to cause mass hallucinations and violent behavior. A chemical agent could produce the same result.

She sat in the captain's chair stunned by the human tragedy, the carnage. Even after listening daily, over and over for weeks, the plight of the crew of both ships still chilled her. Thank God, she thought, whatever was in that rocket is now on the surface of Planet #666, where it will remain forever. We're safe. And she would recommend to Renata that she ban shuttles to the Planet of the Beast.

It wasn't London's official duty to go over the logs but she felt a moral obligation. Like almost everyone else on board the station, she had found the fate of the two ships more than disturbing. But she felt she had to do something, felt compelled to keep searching for life signs, keep reviewing the logs, keep checking the data, hoping against hope that she might find something, anything, that would

give them more information about what that rocket contained. And she knew the thought was crazy, but what if there was one survivor?

Today was her official shift of duty on the bridge, but she came here daily anyway, on her off-hours, and besides listening to the logs, she scanned the planet for communication, movement, heat sources, anything that would indicate that the outcome was not as it seemed. After fourteen days, it was extremely unlikely that anyone who miraculously had survived the crash would still be alive. Nothing she had seen or read or heard contradicted the original findings. Everyone was gone, in the blink of an eye. Snuffed out. She shivered uncontrollably, feeling death too close for comfort. Feeling as if she were going insane and yet compelled to go on with this, and she knew she was obsessed with—

"Cold?" Andre asked, his voice behind and above her, and she jolted, so preoccupied she hadn't heard him enter the bridge.

She bent her head back and looked up at him, and he leaned over to kiss her lips.

God, he's a handsome devil, she thought. Well, devil didn't really nail it, more like a dark angel. Black hair, well-chiseled face, eyes so exquisitely shaped, almost black at moments, and so liquid—he was just her type physically, tall and lean with enough muscle to provide lots of definition. And Andre was about the most stable person on the station, especially where it counted most; the voice of reason tinged with emotion. He always said it was his French background, but of course, like every other person hailing from Earth II, his lineage had been mixed by so many intermarriages over the centuries, since the original Earth had been abandoned, that nobody could really claim a "nationality" as they'd called it back on the original home planet. She'd always found it strange that people on Earth had fought wars and committed genocide to defend and preserve a culture or a racial purity or a national history or even a spiritual belief. Since nationhood no longer existed as a concept, and races and cultures were so homogenized that nobody could tell anyone's genealogy simply by just looking at them, at least those types of conflicts were in the past. In fact, it was a bit of a fad in this century to name a child

after some long deceased ancestor or place of origin, which is how London got her name, and Andre his.

Thoughts of Andre always led to thoughts of having a child, and she wondered if she would ever have one. She would love to have a child with Andre, but he couldn't even commit to her long-term, let alone to creating a new life.

While she contemplated all this yet again, Andre slid his hands down from her shoulders and gently rubbed her breasts. London exhaled a sigh, releasing tension, letting go of the ugly visual images, the hideous sounds, feeling body sensations taking precedence in her awareness. Her nipples firmed under his patient but determined fingertips. She sighed again, relaxing against the arousal.

His head bent low again so that he could whisper into her ear, "Can the captain of the day take a break?"

She giggled. "I've never done it in the captain's chair. Is that an infraction of the station's rules?"

"Probably. Are you willing to chance it?" he breathed, and the rush of warm air stirred her.

London swiveled the chair around and pulled Andre onto her lap, bending him backwards and planting a large kiss on his lips, a dramatic action reminiscent of the types of romantic images that had been in play on the original Earth for several hundred years. They kissed hard and passionately, tongues flicking, and broke apart laughing.

Andre stood, took her by the upper arms and brought her to her feet. They slid their hands along one another's bodies, hers down the front of his pants, his up and under her short red skirt, removing the matching panties she wore. This time Andre sat in the captain's chair and London straddled him, her knees on either side of his thighs. They were both highly aroused, and they climaxed quickly, at the same time.

They stayed in that position a moment, savoring the sensations, kissing, touching, fondling, making the intimacy linger.

"We should get married," she said. "Have kids."

She felt his body tense, and that upset her. They had been through this before. Marrying him was a step, one not particularly necessary

for having children. But London felt that time was pressing. She was twenty-eight years old, and while women now frequently had babies into their sixties, everyone knew that there were prime years, and she was in hers.

"Well, we've still got another six months here," he said, as a way to avoid the issues yet again.

"We can get married now, and I can get pregnant before we leave here, so the first one is born on Earth II."

"Having a child is a huge step to take." He didn't move physically but she felt him pulling away from her emotionally.

"Why is it that every time I bring this up you put me off? If you're not interested in anything long-term with me, let me know now."

"I wouldn't put it quite that way—"

Suddenly, on the com system, they heard a voice say, "Bella Morte, reporting to the bridge. Shift beginning... uh, when is it again? Nine o'clock."

"Shit," London leapt to her feet, smoothed down her skirt and struggled into her underwear while Andre stood and zipped up his pants.

As the door to the bridge swooshed open, they turned out as a unit.

"Hey, how's it going you guys?" Bella Morte sang as she entered the room, oblivious to the dynamic tension and the scent of fluids clinging to the air.

"Good," London gasped.

"Yeah, good," Andre said.

"No kidding?" Akako's savvy voice rang with sarcasm as she followed Bella Morte in.

Andre ran a hand through his hair and busied himself adjusting the focus on a monitor, which didn't need adjusting.

"How was your shift?" Bella Morte asked London.

"Alright, actually. Once in a while I enjoy being up here."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Half the time I hate the fact that we don't have a captain and the other half I like being here all by my lonesome. Not to mention the power."

She laughed her delightful laugh that made everyone in the room grin.

"I suppose they'd assign us a captain if we were going somewhere instead of just circling a barren planet for a year," Akako said.

"Yeah, I guess." Bella Morte absently gave the monitors and equipment a quick visual check.

London scanned her retinas to sign off her shift and Bella Morte scanned hers to sign on. Just then, the bridge door opened again and Emery entered.

"Oh joy!" Akako snapped. "The station's official mutt honors us with his mongrel presence."

Emery scowled at her. He stuttered as if unsure of himself and rather than respond to her comment said, "I've come on behalf of Claude Bardox."

"What a surprise!"

This time Emery ignored her. "He... We are interested in the precise coordinates of the remains of both *The Revival* and *Black Star 13*." He figured that with so many people on the bridge, and him being such a poor liar, he might as well go for the truth, or at least some of it.

"And just why would that be of interest to you?" Akako asked, fists on hips. She had no use for Emery. He wasn't a man; he was hardly a human, just a doormat, and an annoying one at that. Unlike everyone else on this station, she made no effort to keep her feelings about Emery to herself.

He moved to the panel of controls and glanced into the real-time monitor, which showed nothing but black space with a few twinkling lights around a large round dark patch that must be Planet #666. He wanted to keep his face hidden so that he didn't give away his true purpose. "We collected samples on the planet and need to record exactly where they were located." It sounded good to him.

"Why?" Akako said.

Why did she keep pushing this? "Because the samples might be specific to that part of the planet and not another."

"And why does that matter? We're not going to colonize it anyway. It doesn't have any of the qualities we need for human survival. What a waste of time. In fact, revolving around the Planet of the Beast is a waste of time. I'll be glad when they move us out of here."

"That's two of us," Bella Morte said.

"Hardly a waste of time." Emery couldn't help sounding sarcastic. Akako might be beautiful, with her long, sleek, black hair and almond-shaped blue eyes, but she had the tongue of a viper and she was so ignorant! He had to face this dominant force and put her in her place. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"And you do?" Akako snapped. "You're just a suck, so what would you know?"

"I know that our experiment is crucial to mankind!"

"And why would that be?" She figured he was about the stupidest guy she'd ever laid eyes on, and there were plenty who could vie for that title, including Helmet. Maybe that was why she found women so much more attractive, not to mention intelligent. If only Bella Morte were into femmes!

"Because... because..." Emery didn't know what the experiment was and even if he did, he would have to keep it a secret, and now he'd gotten himself into a verbal jam. Help came from a surprising source.

"What Emery means," Andre said, "is that a sample from one part of a planet, even an inhospitable area, can give us information that might help us with changing the atmospheric conditions on that planet, or even altering the atmosphere on another planet with similar but not exact conditions. We could also find a way to create plants that are alien to us, which would sustain us, but we need to know about their growing conditions and that can vary from spot to spot. That's the whole reason why we're cloning plants here, to see what works and what can be altered to suit human needs under the worst conditions."

"Maybe we should clone people," Akako said, staring at Emery, "and get rid of the dim-witted ones."

"One day, you'll regret your words," Emery shouted, feeling a touch of anger until Akako laughed so long and loud at him that he shrank into himself.

"Human cloning is illegal," Andre said, ignoring the put-downs, going right for reality. "Has been since Earth II was colonized."

"Who doesn't know that?" Akako said.

"What exactly is the information you need to know?" Andre asked Emery, who was mildly surprised to have help from anyone on this station. At least Andre had some sense; most of the women who thought they ran this place didn't. Andre might not exactly have liked Emery but he didn't dislike him, and he had always treated him with respect.

"I need the exact coordinates where we touched down, so we can determine the conditions of the area as well as those where the sample came from."

"Why not get the coordinates where you landed from the shuttle? They're registered in the autolog, aren't they?"

Now he was caught. When Felicity left the shuttle, Bardox had erased the autolog so nothing about their clandestine mission would be registered, ensuring that nobody could track their movements on Planet #666. "Uh, we had a malfunction of the autolog and nothing got recorded."

"Figures," Akako said under her breath. And then louder, "That doesn't ring true. Those autologs are state-of-the-art. It wouldn't malfunction."

Emery ignored her, talking to Andre. "But we can pinpoint the exact location where we got the samples if we have the landing coordinates. We know how far we traveled and in which direction. It will give us the area too. The sample location might not be exact but will be close enough."

Andre looked slightly unconvinced by this over-explanation, but not enough to contradict Emery. In fact what Emery said didn't make complete sense. Not only the story of the malfunctioning autolog sounded shaky, but most of the people in this room worked in the field of genetics and knew that "close" isn't usually good enough.

Emery felt very uncomfortable, fearful he'd be snagged in a lie at any moment. He just wanted to retrieve the coordinates and get out of there, and now, with all these people on the bridge, he couldn't very well use Bardox's universal code. That would be a breach of station rules, bypassing the person in command of the bridge in order to do anything with the main computer, especially accessing

information with a code that was probably illegal. He wasn't sure any of that would be legal anywhere in the galaxy.

He already felt his request looked terribly suspicious. Now he'd have to go through channels and record his request. Bardox would be furious. Damn.

"Okay," Bella Morte, who'd been listening to all this back and forth, said. "I'll get you the information and send it to the lab."

"Uh, can I take it with me?"

She turned and rewarded Emery with a raised eyebrow. "Uh, okay, if it's so urgent. No problemo. Sit down. This will take a few minutes. We've got the system still running scans for discrepancies on the logs from *Black Star 13*."

"Did you finish your review of the audio?" Andre asked London.

"Well, I had one more log to listen to, but it doesn't matter. I've heard it before. We all have."

"Is it long?"

"It's short. A few sentences—"

"I wouldn't mind hearing it again," Bella Morte said. "I don't feel I've done enough in terms of scanning for survivors. I just couldn't bring myself to hear all those logs."

"I want to hear it too," Akako added.

"Okay," London told them. "Emery, you'll need to wait for maybe five minutes max."

"Sure," Emery said, having no choice. Great, he thought, this is just great! Now I have to stay here while they all get soppy and sentimental.

London said, "Continue," to the computer, which picked up where she'd left off. The cook's screams as he was being murdered filled the bridge.

When that log ended, the silence of the five listeners was staggering. Everyone looked extremely sober, even Akako, who never normally let slip the aggression etched into her face like a mask.

The next and final log came on, the voice was whispering.

"I... I... If anyone gets this, my name is Sylvain—"

There was a noise, of crashing objects, sounds like things being ripped apart, things that shouldn't have been possible to rip. The

noise grew louder. The breathing of the recorder became intense and fast.

"I'm in a closet, in my quarters. He's coming, I can hear him. This will be short, because any second now I know I'll be the last victim on board *Black Star 13*, victim of J—"

A loud sound interrupted his words, like a door crashing open, followed by a scream and repeated cries of "Help!" Silence followed. Then grunting. The sound of something squishy, as if wet. Then dead air. Finally, heavy thudding that faded to silence, as if a monster were stomping away from the scene of the crime. A crime he had committed.

"Transmission complete," the computer said.

"End logs," London ordered.

No one on the bridge said a word. What was there to say?

The others began the type of general conversation that endeavors to cover deep emotions.

"That was horrible," Bella Morte spoke in a low, frightened voice. "Those poor, poor people."

"I wish Sylvain had fought," Akako said.

"Maybe he was too afraid."

"Well, yeah, who wouldn't be? But it's better to put up a fight and not just cower like that, don't you think?"

"Probably is," Andre said, "although I imagine if an entire crew of over one hundred had been destroyed, you might feel a little hopeless."

"Not me? I'd fight to the end; go out with a bang, not a whimper." She glanced at Emery as she said the last word, implying he would be on the whimpering end of things in such a crisis.

"I'm getting your coordinates," Bella Morte said.

While they waited, London drowned out the voices around her that were busy analyzing what was the right or wrong approach to dealing with a force that could wreak such devastation by focusing on scanning Planet #666 once more before she left the bridge.

When the coordinates appeared where Felicity had landed the shuttle last night, Bella Morte logged them into a hand-pod for Emery to take with him.

As Bella Morte handed over the pod to Emery, London reached out and took it. "Just a second." She was curious. She glanced at the numbers then plugged the pod into the image scanner to see exactly where the shuttle had landed on the map of the planet's surface.

A large red X appeared on the screen over the map. She zoomed in to a patch without much debris, likely the best place to land, given the conditions. She called up the actual surface of the planet on the real-time monitor and zoomed in tight. On screen were the tracks the shuttle had made, fainter than they should be, but she figured that was from the constantly blowing dust.

"Is... is that where we landed?" Emery asked, jumping to his feet when he saw the site that looked familiar. Why in hell was London looking at this area? He was afraid she'd find Jason X. "I'd better take the pod and go," he said. "Bardox is waiting."

Absently, London handed it over. He put the microcomputer into his pocket and said, "I'll log in the request for this so the records are up to date when I get back to the lab," having no intention of doing that.

"Don't worry, I did it for you," Andre said.

Emery's heart beat quickly. "Oh, uh, thank you. Well, I don't want to put you to any more trouble," he said, hoping to distract London from viewing the landing site.

Suddenly, she started manically fiddling with controls. "I see something."

"You couldn't," Emery said, then tried to cover himself. "Trust me, there was nothing there. Just rocks and... and maybe clothing that had held body parts."

"I've got a heat sign. Not far from your landing site."

Everyone but Emery rushed to the monitor.

"Which direction did you say you walked?"

Emery felt cornered. He backed towards the door. "I'm... not certain. I'd have to check with Professor Bardox."

No one insisted he stay and Emery raced through the door and down the corridor. Sweat glued the shirt to his back as he ran. This was awful. They'd find Jason X. Bardox would never forgive him. What could he do?

Because he couldn't think of anything else, he ran half way around the doughnut-shaped station and took the stairs in the center down to Level #2 where Bardox's secret lab and private quarters were located. Bardox was not in the lab, fortunately. Emery loaded the coordinates into the Bardox's personal computer, and then called the professor, who had apparently been showering.

"The information is in your computer, sir."

"Good work, Emery," his boss said, coming through the door looking refreshed. "You've done well."

"Thank you sir," Emery said, feeling as if he'd done less than well.

"Did you encounter any difficulties?"

"No, sir. None." He would be the last to admit that he had virtually screwed this up and now everyone on the station would know the whereabouts of Jason X.

"I don't see a thing," Akako said.

"Me neither," Bella Morte agreed.

"But I saw something. A heat source," London insisted. "It wasn't far from the landing site. It was on the screen a minute ago, and now it's gone."

Andre placed a hand on her shoulder. "I don't see anything either. You might just be tired from listening to those logs again, hoping to see something."

London shook off his hand. "I know what I saw."

"Yes," he said patiently, "but maybe the need to believe that someone is still alive down there made you think you saw—"

"You think I imagined it? No, I did not! There was a heat source."

"Couldn't it have been a star's reflection on something metal?" Bella Morte asked.

"That black hole of a planet?" Akako said. "Highly unlikely anything would reflect on the surface."

"I agree," Andre said. "As unlikely as seeing a heat source two weeks after the crash on a planet that's been scanned hundreds of times since, and one that cannot support human life."

London felt furious and frustrated and knew that she was overreacting to them but couldn't help herself.

"Look, I know what I'm doing. I've scanned this planet more than anyone else over the last couple of weeks. I saw something, and if none of you want to believe me, fine. I'll just check it out myself."

Before any of the three of them could counter that, London turned on her heels and left the bridge in a fury. Others would believe her. And if they didn't, she would just requisition a shuttle and go down there to check it out.

"Absolutely not," Renata said.

"It's not your call. It's Bill's."

Bill looked embarrassed and sheepish. "I gotta agree with Renata, London. We've been scanning the surface with you for over an hour and unless you can show us the heat source and we can prove it's from a life form, I can't see taking a shuttle down to the surface. It's not an easy flight. The Planet of the Beast changes conditions every time we revolve around it, like it's some kind of shape-shifter. We never know what to expect from hour to hour. We could hit a surface storm. As it stands, that planet has an unstable atmosphere and it's constantly being barraged with space debris and asteroids crashing through its outer atmosphere and being pulled down to the surface with some kind of gravity that we know very little about yet."

"Felicity risked it. And we've had two other trips to the surface."

"Yeah, but Felicity was in a bad state emotionally. She was hoping to find Stanislav. And the two missions before were exploratory, and I flew one of them, which is how I know just how dangerous a Planet #666 is for a small shuttle—"

"Look," Renata said, "if you can show us the heat source, we can analyze it, see what's what. It might not be a person anyway. But without that, how the hell can Bill authorize a trip down there? Think about it. It's illogical."

"It's not illogical! Someone might need our help! If we wait until the heat source appears again, and take the time to analyze all the

data, they could be dead. We could be contributing to the demise of a crew member who might just be hoping, praying that we come and rescue him or her and"

"London, calm down," Bill said gently. "Take it easy, okay? Everybody here wants to help, and if there's someone to help down there—"

"Well, nobody is helping. Nobody!"

"Hold on," Renata said. "As head of security, I'm ordering you to sick bay."

"What? That's ridiculous, I—"

"You're under a lot of stress. You've been scanning logs for weeks. It's getting to you. I want Brandi to give you a thorough checkup, maybe prescribe something to—"

"I refuse. And you cannot order me to do that." London felt furious now, prone to violence, ready to lash out at them. How could they be so stubborn, so disbelieving?

"Actually, I can order that," Renata said. "If I feel the security of this station is at risk—and I do—then I can order any crew member to sick bay. I am so ordering."

"I won't go."

Renata looked at Helmet, who had been standing by the door the entire time, arms folded over his chest. Both he and Renata each took one of London's arms. She tried to pull away from the two muscular security personnel but realized instantly how hopeless that effort was.

"Alright!" she snapped. "I'll get there on my own steam."

"Fine," Renata nodded for Helmet to release her. "But we accompany you."

"That's ridiculous, I'm perfectly capable of finding my way to sick bay—"

"Under restraint or under guard, your choice."

"Oh, dammit, alright, accompany me, then." London looked at Bill on the way out as if he had betrayed her, but said, "Bill, keep scanning. Please. I'm telling you, I saw something. We can't let someone die if we can help it."

FIVE

"Okay, guys, ready for another Jason story?"

"Uh, do we have any choice?" Akako asked.

"Go for it!" Helmet shouted, flexing his muscles. "I love this guy. He's the ultimate Big Bad! He couldn't take me, but it's funny to hear how he dispatches everybody else so easily."

"What makes you think he couldn't get the best of you?"

Helmet looked at Akako seated next to him in the common room. He slipped his meaty arm around her shoulder saying "Because I'm a man, little woman and—"

Instantly, Akako jabbed him in the rib with her elbow. Helmet howled, grimacing in pain, and he pulled his arm away fast. "Can't you lighten up a little?"

"Can't you heavy up a little? No woman in her right mind wants a stupid man"

"I'm not stupid, I'm simple. Uncomplicated."

"All brawn, no brain, as they used to say."

"Where's London? She likes these stories," Bella Morte interrupted.

"She's having a checkup," Andre told her, glancing at Renata to confirm his story. Begrudgingly, she nodded slightly.

Missing were Felicity, still preferring to stay in her quarters even though the restrictions had been lifted, and Bill, busy with a routine check of the station's life support systems. Brandi, as always, had work to do in the hospital and was presumably giving London her checkup. And Bella Morte knew that Bardox and Emery would never condescend to hear one of her riveting tales, not if their lives depended on it. Or so she thought.

Suddenly, Emery stood tentatively in the doorway, his fingers curling around the frame trembling slightly. Everyone was stunned to silence. He looked around nervously then took a seat near Andre, as if for protection. All eyes were on him and he half-heartedly glanced at the quiet gathering then looked down at the floor and said, "It's alright if I listen in, isn't it?"

"Uh, sure," Bella Morte said immediately. "Just didn't think it was your thing."

"Yeah, don't piss your pants," Akako said, flipping her silky black hair with one hand.

Helmet laughed sharply, and Renata grinned.

Emery felt embarrassed, but ignored it. He was here on a mission. Maintaining a "cover" as Bardox put it. "I... I wanted to try something new," he said, feeling his face redden. He kept looking down, hoping the others would not see the blush for the lie it exposed.

"That's commendable," Andre told the group, but no one responded.

"Okay." Bella Morte, story-teller par excellence, took control. "This grisly Jason tale goes back to Earth in the 1930s. It begins on a warm night in Kansas and—"

"Kansas?" Akako said. "Where the hell was Kansas?"

"Somewhere in North America," Helmet told her. "United States, I think."

"It was," Bella Morte confirmed. "My ancestors were from there, that's why this story is so personal to me. It has to do with a girl named Dorothy, who just happens to be part of my genealogical records and..."

Brandi removed a pressure patch from the stainless steel case and placed it onto London's upper arm. She pulled off the removable strip and London's blood pressure was recorded instantly in words, digits, colors and symbols. Brandi said to the computer, "Eighty over one-sixty."

"That's normal, right?" London said.

"Yes, very. Every test I've conducted puts you in the healthy range."

"That's what I told them," London said, starting to rise up off the table.

"Hold on, I've got one more test I want to conduct. You can sit for this one."

London sat upright and the back of the exam table rose to meet her back, then the whole thing lowered, transforming instantly into a chair.

Once Brandi had put her instruments away, she gracefully slipped her tall, lean body into a chair that faced London's. With one hand she tried to sweep escaping strands of white-blonde hair back into the chignon that normally held her hair in place. London thought that the hairstyle showed more of what everyone recognized as a perfect oval face. The pale hair contrasted well with Brandi's olive skin and startling violet eyes, the whole effect accented by high cheekbones, and well-defined lips that neither turned up at the corners nor down. London thought for the hundredth time just how beautiful Brandi was, and also how lonely a human being.

"You know, life on a station is fraught with problems," Brandi began. "We're in close proximity to one another twenty-four, sixty, as we revolve quickly around this God-forsaken planet. Sometimes the slightest thing can set off undercurrents of tension that have been brewing a while."

"You think I'm crumbling under the stress of being cooped up here with the same ten people for six months."

"Crumbling is putting it in an extreme," Brandi said with a small smile. From the looks of it, that smile didn't come easily to her. "I'm just suggesting that it's hard being on a station. We're used to Earth II. Out here in this solar system, the sun is so far away that we don't even have sunlight; it's all artificial, because we're not close enough to any star to benefit. That alone takes a toll. Not to mention the nutrients our bodies need, which we derive from a sun, that never quite measure up when taken in pill form—they're adequate, of course, just not the same. Our bodies know that."

"I know what you're getting at, Brandi, and I appreciate the concern, but I don't think I'm overly claustrophobic."

Brandi nodded and went on. "Relationships are difficult, especially intimacies. Expectations can develop that lead to tensions and—"

"I'm not tense because Andre won't commit." Even as she said it, she sighed. "Okay, maybe I'm stressed a bit about that, but that doesn't have any bearing on this situation. I just saw something on the monitor and nobody will believe me, that's the whole story. Nothing to do a psych session over."

"From what Renata told me, no one else has seen a life sign on Planet #666 and—"

"That doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

"London, I don't want to argue with you. I'm trying to help. This is a dialogue. What I'm getting at is that it's hard to convince other people of something when you're the only one who's aware of it. There might have been a life sign there. In fact, it's possible that someone survived the crash. But they wouldn't have lived for long in that atmosphere. And what you saw might be explained in other ways. For instance, a body might have been in a space suit that protected it and at the same time debris or planetary conditions might have hidden it from detection and changing conditions could have exposed it. But the person could not have survived long without a specialized suit. In a normal suit, the oxygen supply would have run out in four or five hours max. And the atmospheric conditions could have ripped the suit open out of the blue and what you saw was the remnants of the body's heat, which would have been contained within the suit, or part of the suit still intact. Does that make sense to you?"

London closed her eyes. "It does. Of course it does. Don't you think I've thought of this? I just want us to go check it out."

"And that's reasonable, or would be if it were a planet that wasn't so dangerous to humans."

London sighed. Tears came to her eyes. "I have a hard time with all those deaths."

"I understand. It's been rough for most of us. I've talked with a number of people about their reactions, and trust me, you're not alone with your sadness, anger and grief."

Brandi handed London a tissue. After London blew her nose twice and dabbed at her eyes, she took Brandi's outstretched hand. "You're

so great. Thanks for being there for me; for all of us, and especially for Felicity. I know this has been super hard for her."

"It's my job. And my pleasure," Brandi said.

"You know, I've often seen you as sad yourself, even before this recent tragedy."

"We all have a life," Brandi said, feeling a bit awkward. She didn't want the tables turned, so she became the patient. But she also didn't want to sound aloof. "I've had my share of heartache. I lost people close to me on Planet #302, in that implosion."

"Oh my God, that's so awful. I'm so sorry. I remember reading about that planet's sun going nova. That whole sector just... disappeared."

Brandi nodded. She patted London's hand and stood. "Life isn't perfect, London. The universe is an amazing place, alive with wonders. It's also crammed with horrors, some obvious, some not so apparent until they slam us, and we never know what's going to happen next. We're here today, gone tomorrow, and all we can do is try to make the most of our time."

London sensed that there was more to the unhappiness that Brandi carried on her shoulders like a heavy death shroud, weighing her down. The station's doctor rarely participated in group activities, rarely socialized with the others on the station, and spent most of her time in the hospital alone, doing whatever doctors do when there are no patients to attend to.

"Are you feeling better?" Brandi asked.

"I am. Thanks. I still want to check out that life sign, but I'll monitor the situation and see if it appears again. I think that's the sanest way to go."

"I agree. But please, London, don't obsess over those logs. Listening to people dying is grim material. You need something more —"

Brandi watched London's eyes close as she fell back against the chair, which instantly reclined. She would have rushed to her patient, but for the fact that she felt herself falling to the floor and at the same time struggling for breath...

"And then Jason just walked away, the eyeballs of both Dorothy and Toto glued to his chest like macabre war metals. But he was no warrior, just a damaged soul, so far outside the human race that he could never return to any semblance of humanity."

"Wow," said Akako. "That was a pretty good one."

"I liked the part about the kidneys coming out of the tin man's body. That takes skill with a kni—"

Suddenly, Helmet fell over to his left as Akako fell into him and Andre into her domino style. Renata, kneeling, fell forward. Bella Morte noticed all this in the split second before her jaw went slack and her head snapped back against the wall. Only Emery remained conscious. The hidden portable life support he wore which infused oxygen into his bloodstream saved him.

He stood and walked out into the hallway calmly. Once he'd counted to ten as he and Bardox had planned, he called into his com unit with a voice feigning concern. "Hello? Is anybody on this station there? Hello?" He turned a few corners and ended up in the engineering room where Bill lay flat on his back, his digital diagnostic tool blinking in his hand.

Switching to a private channel, Emery said into the com button, "Professor Bardox?"

"Yes, Emery. Are they all accounted for?"

"I'm headed to the hospital right now."

Once he peeked in and saw Brandi and London asleep, the former very pale, Emery said, "Just one left, sir."

"I've checked on Felicity. She is as the others. I'll be in the shuttle bay awaiting you."

"Be there in a flash, sir."

Emery hurried down to the shuttle bay, heart fluttering with nervousness. His head believed that Bardox could fly the shuttle, but the quivering pump that he depended on for survival was anything but convinced.

When he reached the bay, Bardox was already suited up. "Hurry, Emery, we have just three hours. I set the computer to infuse the

station with sufficient oxygen to revive the personnel at," he checked his watch, "zero-eight hundred. After all, we don't want them brain dead. Then we'd have to run the station ourselves." He chortled at his joke.

Emery quickly donned the heavy space suit, trying to quell not only his fears, but his worries. Having heard against his will that audio log from *Black Star 13*, he knew who had murdered the entire crew of the ship. That, plus listening to Bella Morte's grim talk of Jason back on Earth centuries before he reached outer space... It was fiction, but wasn't fiction based on truth? Could Jason X—the new and improved model—be immortal?

He dare not expose his fears to Bardox who would not only treat him with scorn, but would likely not confide in him and Emery was so nervous that he needed to be kept abreast of everything, if only to preserve his own sanity.

Bardox pressed the control panels in the glass room with a timed delay, just as Felicity had done, but not the panel that would record the flight. "Come along," he said, boarding one of the shuttles, Emery right behind.

As Bardox took the captain's seat, he shut and locked the shuttle door. "Belt up, Emery," he ordered. As if he has to tell me, Emery thought, feeling sweat trickling down his face inside the helmet. He put his hand up to wipe his forehead, only to have it contact the visor that protected his face from the elements that would otherwise destroy him. The mask also trapped him in this suit. And he was trapped in this shuttle.

"Sir!" he said, a bit too loudly, feeling claustrophobic, eyes glued to the image monitor as the shuttle bay door opened, "maybe we should try to wake Felicity and have her pilot us."

"Felicity is not about to help us again, Emery," Bardox said with exaggerated calm. "I am perfectly skilled at flying this shuttle. Sit back and relax."

Emery tried.

Once it was unlocked from its moorings, the shuttle rose but did not move forward. "We're... we're going up sir, but not out!" Emery's voice was a squeak.

"I'm aware of that!" Bardox snapped. He flipped a few switches, powering up, and the shuttle began moving forward. They had risen high and cleared the top of the doorframe only by the length of a man's body, and Emery heard the back of the shuttle roof scraping.

Then they were out in space, free-floating: On the image monitor, he saw the shuttle bay door close behind them as if cutting them off from the land of the living.

Suddenly the shuttle flipped, left then right, and did a three hundred sixty degree spin, leaving Emery gasping and Bardox cursing. "Damned turbulence," the professor snapped, frantically pushing buttons, which seemed to escalate the rocking. "Right yourself!" he commanded the shuttle.

The computer voice responded, "Do you wish to activate the autopilot?"

"Yes, of course! Isn't that what I said?"

"Autopilot activated. Attempting to right the shuttle."

Emery thought that it took hours, but it was far more likely to have been less than a minute. Finally the small shuttle leveled out. "Proceed to Planet #666," Bardox ordered, "the Planet of the Beast." Another chortle.

Emery sat tensely, staring at the image monitor as the large black disc that was the planet loomed larger and larger on the screen. When they had been here before, somehow, it didn't seem as dark and foreboding. Now, he felt he was being sucked towards oblivion. Bardox's association of the numbers with The Beast of the Christian Bible did not help relax him at all.

To distract himself, he said, "Professor Bardox, what exactly is this experiment about?"

"Emery, I thought you'd never ask."

In fact, Emery had wanted to ask, many times, but knew from experience that Bardox not only jealously guarded his plans but would often grow impatient if Emery probed. Then he'd share even less until Emery had re-established some basic level of trust through subservience. Trust based on not exceeding a line that Emery did not know existed yet lurked in Bardox's head.

"As you know, Emery, I've been performing cloning experiments."

"Uh, yes, sir," Emery said, wondering why Bardox was stating the obvious. He was the head geneticist, in charge of all plant cloning experiments.

"Unknown to the rest of those aboard G7, and known only to me and now you, my assistant, is a personal experiment I've been conducting."

"Cloning a limb," Emery said readily enough. Bardox's body, for some reason, had rejected every cloned arm made from cells from every part of his body, which is why he wore that weird metal prosthetic.

"That, and more, of which you have been ignorant."

The shuttle seemed to speed up. "Hang on Emery, we're about to enter the outer atmosphere of Planet #666, and if I recall correctly, this too will be bumpy."

Bardox didn't lie. The shuttle shifted, swayed and then flipped head over heels twice. It took the autopilot a long time to right the vessel, but Emery didn't notice, he was too busy barfing into his helmet, just like the last time, gagging on the smell of vomit. He thought they would never make it to the planet's surface alive. And then there was the trip back. He threw up again, filling the helmet with everything he had consumed that day.

Finally, when he'd taken possession of himself, he checked the image monitor. The surface of the planet was barely visible, and it would be the same on the real-time monitor. Planet #666 had a moon but it seemed to only reflect light from this solar system's sun once every week. Today was obviously not the day. The monitor was pitch black and once in a while a vague darker black shape moved across the screen, which might have been one of the many carbon-covered mountains that produced the enormous amount of black rubble that littered the black soil that covered this hideous frozen rock in space.

The shuttle was fairly steady now, as was Emery's stomach. His last meal filled the base of the helmet, and more than anything he wanted to remove the headgear and get rid of the stinking mess. He might do so now, while in the shuttle, since the pressure and the life support systems were the same as the station, but that might change

any second. Better now, though, than when they reached the planet's surface.

While he unscrewed the pins that held the helmet to his suit, he tried to backtrack their conversation. "So, sir, as you were saying, you're collecting Jason X's DNA for what purpose? Are you intending to use it to make yourself an arm?"

"Of course, Emery, that would be one of my purposes. DNA from Jason X would produce a limb worth owning, one that would far outlast and out-function anything my own DNA could create. But that is but one of my goals. The other is—"

Suddenly, the shuttle picked up speed. Ferocious speed. "We've moved beyond the outer atmosphere. We should be landing in—"

The shuttle plunged straight towards the planet. Emery could not see it on the image monitor because everything was blacker than black. But he felt it as his body fell forward, restrained only by the belt that held his torso and helmet in place. The barf rose up the glass, obscuring his vision, but he was too terror-stricken to finish untwisting the pins and instead held the helmet on with both globed hands.

The nosedive brought the dark surface close fast and a quick glance showed Emery the planet's terrain taking shape.

Suddenly, as if the hand of some benevolent god reached down, the shuttle righted itself again and raced along horizontally. "Sir, the speed is too great! We're going to crash!"

"Nonsense, Emery, the autopilot knows what it is doing," Bardox said tensely, pushing buttons in what looked to Emery to be a random pattern. The monitor showed the ground close below, and they hit a bolder, tilting to the left, and Emery cried out. Suddenly, the shuttle connected with the ground, bounced off it into the air, crashed down again onto the rocky surface, then skidded along as Bardox struggled with the manual navigational stick.

"Sir, shut the power. We're going to explode!"

"What the hell do you think I'm trying to do? The damn throttle is stuck—"

"Order the autopilot to do it—"

All of a sudden, Bardox got control of the throttle and managed to set the shuttle perfectly horizontal. The vehicle still sped along at a blinding pace and Emery knew that if they didn't slow down they would crash into something, and soon.

The moment Bardox ordered, "Autopilot, shut power." They did.

The force of the crash stopped the shuttle dead. Emery and Bardox were thrown forward, saved only by the belts holding them to the seats, although Emery's seat came loose off its moorings and hung by one corner, leaving him hanging at a painful angle.

The shuttle's power source whirred as if the vessel was still in motion, but it was not. They had, from the flickering image on the image monitor, landed on a mesa.

Emery, face covered in puke, fought to catch his breath, and struggled to bring himself under control. He hiccupped continuously, and his body shook. The inside of his chest felt as if it held a fast-ticking bomb about to explode.

Suddenly Bardox managed to find the right button to shut off the power manually. Silence reigned but for the roaring in Emery's ears.

"We've arrived," Bardox said cheerfully, the understatement of the century.

Before Emery could even get his seat fully upright, hanging on that one leg, Bardox was out of his, and had begun opening the door. Emery remembered his helmet—he wouldn't get a chance to clean it out now. Quickly, he tightened the screws so as not to attract the vacuum this planet offered.

He got himself up and out of the chair, and to the doorway as fast as he could. Bardox yelled at him over the com system, "What is taking you so long?"

Emery exited the shuttle to stand on the shelf where it balanced precariously, and looked over the edge. He tried to crouch down and slide from the shelf to the ground, which wasn't so far, but his legs were shaky. Bardox yelled, "Oh, for heaven's sake, just jump."

He did, and fell onto his face. It was a good thing he jumped. The shuttle suddenly toppled off the shelf and the shelf crumbled at the same moment and everything just missed him by an arm's length.

Emery lay listening to the crash still ringing in his ears, beyond shock, his vision obscured by the black dust that had risen up all around them with the impact.

"Get up!" Bardox shouted and when Emery struggled to his feet he found the geneticist standing with hands on hips, impatient as always.

Emery turned slowly. The shuttle had cracked open. The aft stuck up in the air over the crushed fore. "Our... our shuttle!" Emery cried in a small voice. "It's destroyed. How will we get home?"

"Don't worry about that now. We must find Jason X. We have approximately..." he checked his watch, "three hours to revive him, sample the DNA and get back to the station."

"But... but how will we get back? We have no shuttle."

"Where there's a will, Emery, there you will find the way."

Emery stared at Bardox. For the first time he saw the geneticist as not brilliant but insane. What had he been thinking, coming down here like this with a madman? Now they were stranded, and everyone on the station was asleep. And even when they woke, they wouldn't know Bardox and Emery had gone. or where. Likely the com system in the shuttle was shattered, since it was at the front of the shuttle—

"Come along, Emery," Bardox said in his calm and reasoned voice, a touch of cheer to the tone.

Emery turned to see the white form moving away from him through the darkness, kicking up more dust from the surface into whatever this desolate planet called an atmosphere.

He hurried to catch up with Bardox, who was muttering about calculations and Jason X's whereabouts.

They plodded along in their heavy space shoes, kicking up more grit as they went, the small helmet lights and the hand-held lights not nearly enough in this gloom. Emery felt the silence like a burden. His own labored breathing and Bardox's were all that broke up the total emptiness of this inhospitable realm. Why exactly were they here? What was Bardox's master plan anyway? He took the opportunity to probe the geneticist. He had a right to know what he was risking his life for!

"Professor Bardox, you were saying, about the other reason you need Jason X's DNA?"

"To create a new species, of course."

Emery didn't think he heard right. "A new species, sir? You mean a new life form?"

"In a sense, yes. I plan to clone Jason X by implanting his seminal DNA into ova from a human woman."

Emery stopped dead in his tracks. "Sir, I don't think I understand —"

"There's nothing to understand, Emery. Humanity is flawed, as we both know. Humans are fragile physically, emotionally and psychically, as it were. Jason X is not vulnerable in any of these areas. Physically there are none who can equal him. He is not hampered by emotion. As to his psychic life, we can only speculate as to whether or not he dreams, whether or not he possesses a soul, as the quaintly poetic of my colleagues would deem it. The product of a match between Jason X and a human woman would produce not a monster but a superhuman, capable of superior performance, of excellence in thinking. Provided the human woman is brilliant."

Bardox had gotten ahead of Emery, who kept slowing to consider what was being said. "Do you have a... human woman... in mind to bear this clone, or will it happen in the lab?"

"Certainly not in the lab, Emery! What could you be thinking? A clone born in a Petri dish will not fare well, as you should be aware. No, this hybrid will need to be born from a female and that means implanting the material directly into one of her eggs. Ah, here we are."

They arrived at the site where they had left Jason X's body. The constant winds on Planet #666 seemed to have cleared off much of the debris covering him, and for the first time Emery could see the entire body, metallic mask down to metallic shoes and frozen fleshy bits in between.

Bardox stood over Jason X, hands on hips, staring down. "He's quite the specimen, Emery. There were none before him and none after him that can compete."

A sense of doom came over Emery. Suddenly he knew he would die. It was as simple as that. They were stuck here, no shuttle to return to the station, just a few hours of oxygen, and now, the body of Jason X that Bardox was hell-bent on reviving. He'd already motioned for Emery to put down the case and open it and was rummaging for the cables that would use stored power to shock the corpse into life.

Emery voiced a half-hearted protest. "Sir, I don't think we should revive him. We might get a sample from an area that's been more protected—"

"Emery, are you not a scientist? You make me question your competence. We need to revive him entirely, and obtain the deepest samples. Hand me the generator switch."

Emery, on automatic, handed over the switch. He watched Bardox attach two cables to the two points on the switch that would send a current out and back. The other ends of the cable he held up, scanning the body.

"I wonder where would be the best points to attach these."

Bardox made passes over the body stiff as a boron slab, and finally attached one to the genitals. The other he put onto the chest. "We'll try the heart and testes first, and if need be, perhaps the brain."

Once the needles from the cables were forced inside the icy flesh of Jason X, Bardox stood. "Emery, would you like to do the honors?" He started to hand him the generator button, but Emery backed away.

"No... no, sir. I... I'd rather not."

"Very well. Your name could have gone down in the annals of genetic history, but if you fail to grasp the opportunity, there is nothing I can do about it."

Emery shook his head as if to clear it. This was stupid. If they did get out of this, and if he didn't do anything to help, surely he wouldn't even be mentioned by name in Bardox's paper, just called "my assistant," if that.

"Professor Bardox, yes, I'd like to press the button."

Bardox handed over the mechanism with his good hand. Emery noticed that the winds had picked up. Black pebbles and even some

of the smaller bits of the two ships that had remained intact skittered over the ground.

Emery pressed the button. A small sound reached through his helmet but there were no sparks at the ends of the cables, no jolting of the body, nothing to indicate that power had been transferred and that matter was reanimated.

Bardox had in his good hand a small computer. He spoke into it now. "Reading on the subject, Jason X. Vital signs."

The computer responded immediately Bardox's voice, since he had programmed it himself. "No vital signs."

"Emery," he said. "Charge the subject again, and double the power."

Emery adjusted the level of power and pressed the button. Just the low hum. They waited.

"Subject's vital signs," Bardox said again.

"No vital signs," the computer answered.

"Double that, and again!" he told Emery, but the third time produced the same result.

Bardox fiddled with the cable needles, removing the one from the heart. "Help me turn him," he said to Emery, who reluctantly touched Jason X's shoulder. It was as though he had grasped a poisonous creature and felt it trying to sting him, but of course there was no movement and Bardox was impatient. "Come. Lift him."

Emery turned the shoulder and pulled so that Bardox could place the cable pin up into the brain stem.

"You may release him now, and press the button again."

Emery did this, staring at the body lying at his feet. He pressed the button. The computer assured them there were no vital signs. Three more attempts produced the same negative result.

"Well," Bardox said in a flattened voice, "I suppose we're too late."

Emery felt relief. He couldn't say why, just that if Jason X's body had reanimated, even a part of it, he knew that disaster would have struck. That, he felt in every bone of his body.

But just when he believed that Bardox had given up, the professor had another brilliant idea. "We'll attach both cable needles to his brain stem and give it one more try. Here, lift him up again."

Emery placed his hands on Jason X's shoulder. He pulled him forward towards his own chest. Bardox removed the pin from the genitals and inserted it next to the other one in the brain stem. Emery felt drawn to the face. He looked down.

Jason X's eyes snapped open.

Emery screamed and dropped the body, backing away quickly.

"What is wrong with you?" Bardox said, his voice angry. "I almost misplaced the pin."

"He's... he's alive."

"Nonsense."

"I saw his eyes open. Look—"

When Emery pointed, Jason X's eyes were closed.

Bardox asked the computer, which said again, "No vital signs."

"It was a figment of your imagination; wishful thinking, no doubt. At the very best, a muscle spasm. Are you satisfied?"

But Emery was not satisfied. He knew what he saw.

"Press the button," Bardox demanded.

Emery shook his head and stretched out his hand, the one holding the mechanism.

Bardox scowled, his face dark in the eeriness of Emery's helmet light. He snatched the mechanism from Emery and hit the button himself. Once more, there was no indication that any alteration had come about in the body of Jason X.

"Alright," Bardox said with a sigh, "we'll take a sample anyway. Perhaps we've regenerated some tissue. I'll remove it from the areas where I placed the needles. Put the equipment away and help me lift him again."

Emery crouched down to replace the cables and the power source back into the case removing the extractor Bardox would need to take a sample from Jason X. The wind had picked up, and when he stood, it buffeted him, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"Well?" Bardox snapped. "Are you going to help me lift him?"

Emery could not bring himself to touch Jason X again. He shook his head once for no, and handed over the sampling kit.

"You're useless!" Bardox announced. "You'll receive no credit whatsoever for this experiment. I'm sorry I chose you as an assistant."

You're wasting my valuable time."

While Bardox ranted, he struggled to roll Jason X over enough that he could remove the needles from his brain stem. Finally he managed, although the prosthetic made such work difficult. He handed the needles and cables and the charger, everything, to Emery. "Can you put these away, or will that also prove too difficult?"

Emery took the equipment and fitted everything into its proper place in the case. He had had to crouch down, nearly unable to stand, as the wind seemed more powerful than his slight frame.

Bardox inserted the extractor into Jason X's genitals and then into his chest about heart level, then finally tried to insert it into the back of his neck by lifting his head. He could not easily hold the monster with his artificial limb and gave Emery a dark look, but Emery did not rise to the bait. Whatever the outcome, he knew he would see no praise and preferred to avoid damnation. Bardox used his knee to prop up Jason X enough that he could sample the brain stem.

Emery again saw the eyes snap open.

He did not cry out. He kept contact with those soulless, pale blue orbs that seemed to see through him. They looked dead, yet Emery saw almost a flicker of some base intelligence. And recognition, not for who he was, but for what he was: human. An enemy. Prey.

In a panic, Emery turned and ran, hearing Bardox calling after him, "Wait, you fool. You'll never find your way back to the shuttle without the coordinates."

His voice faded as the sound of the wind rose up. Emery, bent over almost double, staggered, leaning into the gale force. His steps were agonizingly slow, even though he ran as if for his life. He'd hoped to follow the footprints they'd left in the soil of this alien terrain but the dust had already filled them in, obliterated them, and Emery could only go in the direction his instincts guided him.

By some miracle, he saw it ahead, the remains of their shuttle, and a small cry escaped his lips. This should be safety, shelter, but it was not. Once he'd grabbed onto the hull so that he wouldn't blow away, he pulled himself into the door that he had so recently exited.

The shuttle was wrecked, almost totally. The front had been crushed, and with it the navigational and communications panel. He trudged his way down the sloped vessel to the front, visually examining everything as he went. The shuttle's position, though half buried in the planet's soil, was still precarious and the vessel shifted as he went, knocking him off his feet, and he slid part of the way on his bottom.

Despite knowing it was futile, he tried to contact the station. None of the instruments had the least level of power available to them. Emery didn't know what to do so he did nothing, just sat on the remains of what had been the pilot's seat and held his helmet-encased head in his hands.

Bardox finished up with the extraction, thoroughly annoyed with Emery. Once they returned to the station, he would see that a more intelligent and obedient assistant replaced the man. It might take months to get such a replacement, but he would refuse to work with Emery in the meantime, unless he absolutely needed him, and right now, Bardox could not envision a situation where that would occur.

He removed the extractor and inched backwards, dropping Jason X's head to the ground. The giant of a man lay on his back, prone, still dead it seemed. Bardox did notice that the eyes were open, a curious reaction to the stimulation, but not out of the realm of possibility. He had read accounts from the past where the eyes of corpses would snap open at the most inopportune times, which led to the development of glue to hold the eyelids shut, all back in the days when people, for some reason, wanted to view a dead body.

He packed the samples into the sterile case, trying to avoid letting too much dust get inside, and closed the lid. He checked which direction he should go on the compass, then picked up the lighter of the two cases in his artificial hand, and the heavier one with his fleshy hand, stood with some difficulty, and turned into the wind to make his way back to the shuttle.

Bardox struggled all the way back to the shuttle, barely able to stand, hardly able to take a step and maintain his balance. In a way he was glad he had the heavy cases to carry; they weighed him down. The atmosphere of this barren world was worsening by the second. He had to reach the shuttle so he could think clearly again.

He stopped now and again to check the digital compass and soon saw the remains of the shuttle that had brought him here. Once he'd hefted the cases in, and crawled inside himself, finally getting out of that damned wind, he found Emery curled up into a fetal position, looking like a coma patient. The boy lifted his head only a little as Bardox entered. What a weakling, permitting his fears to overtake him. Bardox knew he had made a severe mistake in picking him as an assistant—it was all clear now. Well, it wouldn't be long before the others woke and rescued them. Then he would be back on the station and able to begin his experiment.

"What are we going to do?" Emery asked in a plaintive voice.

"We're going to wait until the others wake, which I estimate will be in about one hour's time. They will realize the shuttle is missing, track it, see our life signs and come to rescue us."

"What if they don't?"

"What if they don't—what?" Bardox said, growing impatient.

"Wake. Rescue us."

"Of course they will wake, you idiot. It's merely a timed lower level of oxygen, not enough to cause brain damage, just enough to bring about unconsciousness for a few hours. As to rescuing us, that is human nature. We're missing, and alive, they will find us."

"But we only have a little air left. What if they don't come in time and we suffocate? And the storm outside is growing severe—it could knock the shuttle remains half way around this forsaken planet—"

It was like listening to a child whine, and Bardox, the stoic parent, sighed. "They will still find our life signs. They will still come."

"But what if they don't see us? What if they can't reach us in time —"

"Emery, I'm getting tired of your negativism. Kindly shut up, or leave the shuttle."

"Leave the shuttle?" Emery said in a small voice. "You want me to go out there? Alone? With him out there?"

Bardox had had enough. Emery was now beyond being an annoyance. He was a complete pain in the ass and Bardox had no intention of putting up with this whining for another hour or more. He grabbed Emery by the arm and yanked him to his feet.

The assistant struggled feebly until Bardox got him to the door, then he fought violently, clutching the doorframe with both gloved hands as if his life depended on it. He was a small man, though, and Bardox had nearly twice his weight. He shoved the assistant out the door and slammed it shut in short order, and locked from within.

Emery spent time and energy screaming until Bardox turned off the com unit in his suit. The pounding on the door kept up for a long time, but it was dulled by the helmet, and easy enough to ignore. Claude Bardox used the time to record comments into his personal computer, which he would one day use in his memoirs.

Emery finally gave it up. Bardox would not let him in. There was nothing to do but stop wasting his energy on what was futile.

His back to the shuttle, he slid to the planet's surface, locking his legs around part of the shuttle's landing bars so that he didn't fly off into the swirling darkness. He had no idea how to measure wind but knew this would be off the scale of any measurement on Earth II.

He felt overloaded, his adrenal glands in high gear from stress. Bardox was probably right. Why wouldn't they wake? Why wouldn't they come and rescue them? What he'd seen—the eyes of Jason X—that surely was a muscle spasm, as Bardox said. It had to have been.

His eyes began to close from exhaustion. A nap. He needed a nap. That couldn't hurt. And when he woke, the station crew would be here, taking him back, and he could finally open this damned helmet and get away from the stench of his own vomit. Away from everything terrifying him.

Suddenly a shadow crossed his vision. Emery's eyes flew open. He scanned the horizon, trying to see beyond the black wind that

whipped the air at high speed.

Heart pounding, he told himself to be calm. It's nothing. There's nothing out there. But during the ten minutes it took to quiet his nerves, Emery's eyes checked back and forth, back and forth, peering through the darkness, squinting, searching for something even darker.

Finally, he had to assure himself there was nothing, no one there. And sleep called. He rested his body back against the damaged shuttle, clinging to the landing gear with his hands as well as his legs in the hope he wouldn't blow away.

Then he heard it, and his eyes opened wide. That sound. He listened carefully. It couldn't be debris flying around; the sound was too steady, too methodical for that, too... step by step. What made him think of steps? You couldn't hear steps in dust, could you?

In the moments that his eyes had closed, the darkness had grown denser. Now, he would not have been able to discern the details of a shape even if he was able to see one. But he could still hear. He'd always had acute hearing. It had saved him from violence in his childhood at the school, and it would save him again. But now the steps had ceased.

He could hear breathing.

SIX

London woke slowly, groggily. Once her vision cleared, she glanced around her and realized she was in the hospital, and recent history began to resurface. She'd been getting tests run, no, that wasn't all... she'd been talking with Brandi about—

Brandi lay in a heap on the floor near her feet looking horribly pale, especially around the eyes, and her lips resembled the ice on Saturn.

London fell to her knees beside the doctor. Brandi's skin seemed inordinately cool, and clammy; London shook her, at first gently, then harder. "Brandi, wake up. Brandi. Are you alright?"

London's medical training was minimal, the usual emergency techniques, and she used these now to move Brandi's body flat onto her back. She checked her air passages, and elevated Brandi's head, and decided given her paleness, she'd better elevate her feet instead. In Brandi's pocket she found the digital stethoscope and placed it on the doctor's chest. Instantly it recorded a slow, weak heartbeat.

"Help," London called into her com button. "Bella Morte to the hospital. Emergency! Bella Morte, respond."

She waited. No response came from the only lab techie on the station with any medical qualifications. Where was she? "Bella Morte. Anyone. Come in."

"We're... we're here," a slurring voice answered; she recognized it as Andre's.

"I need help. Brandi is down. Please, come to the hospital immediately."

"We're coming," Bella Morte said, her voice a shadow of its normal perkiness.

While waiting, London applied a cold compress to Brandi's forehead and recorded her pulse and blood pressure, which was low. Brandi breathed shallowly, the sound raspy, and another tool recorded blocked airways. London opened Brandi's mouth wide for the second time, making sure the doctor's tongue was not down her throat, which it was not. She didn't want to intubate, since she did

not feel she possessed the proper skills for that procedure, but the breathing thing worried her.

While she waited, London recorded glucose and cholesterol levels and listened to the frantic calls pouring through the com system around the station.

Quickly, Renata took charge, saying, "This is Renata Henderson, head of security. I am in charge here, by virtue of statute number 73 of the intergalactic code, which covers emergency situations. I will call out names and you will report in immediately with your location and your status. Helmet!"

"I'm right in front of you," he said. "In good shape."

"Bella Morte."

"Uh, yeah, ditto. Got a headache, though. Headed to the hospital."

"Akako."

"On my way to the bridge. I have a headache too."

"Same with me on both counts," Andre said.

"Felicity."

"In my quarters. I feel a little nauseous."

"Bill."

"I'm at the main engineering station, life support, where I passed out. I'm okay."

"Why aren't you at the bridge? Wasn't it your shift?"

"Yes, it's my shift, but I put everything on auto, and the data is...was flowing in on my finger recorder so I was on top of it. Uh, it still is. Everything is normal on the bridge. I came down here because of a mini flux in life support."

"Alright," Renata said, her voice not quite approving. "Emery."

No response.

"Emery, Report in."

"Claude Bardox."

Again nothing.

"Professor Claude Bardox, report in. This is Head of Security and you are required in a non-scientific emergency to abdicate command of this station to me. Now, report in."

Renata ordered, "With the exception of London, Brandi and Bella Morte, everyone else will report to the bridge immediately."

"I think I should continue to check life support from here, then join you," Bill said. "Something obviously went wrong."

"Roger, got that, but make it quick. We have a life-threatening emergency in progress."

Bella Morte joined London in the hospital. While she rechecked the readings, she said to the computer, "Bring up Brandi's medical history."

"Confidential information. Apart from an emergency situation, only the owner of the history may—"

"This is an emergency situation. Authorization Bella Morte, also known as Bella Morrison; laboratory cloning techie, second-in-command medical personnel. Override the lockout." She scanned Brandi's pupils with a focused beam of light.

"Visual or audio?" the computer asked.

"Audio."

"Brandi Essex Williams was born on—"

"Existing and potential medical conditions."

Once she and London heard of Brandi's heart condition, they were both stunned. Apparently Brandi had lived her entire life with a recurring hole in her heart, and no one on G7 knew about it. Several surgeries had repaired it again and again with laser seams but the hole was determined to reform, and Brandi refused an artificial heart, a cloned heart, and a donated organ. The computer assured them that hers was a rare condition, one in six hundred million. Secondary symptoms included breathing difficulties along the lines of asthma, poor blood circulation to the limbs which could bring on extreme fiber myalgia leading to poor blood supply to the limbs, and she was predisposed to multiple sclerosis as well as...

"Prognosis?"

"Expiration by the age of twenty-five."

"How old is Brandi?" London asked quietly.

"Twenty-six," Bella Morte said clinically. "Help me move her to a treatment table."

Bella placed an emergency board beside Brandi and together she and London lifted the doctor onto it. Bella pressed a button on the side of the board and it lifted to the height of a hospital gurney. They

wheeled her into one of the two hospital rooms and slid her over onto the bed.

Bella took a moment to examine the results of the tests London had run, and a couple she had just done herself. "The quick test results indicate she's suffered lung damage from lack of oxygen, and her heart has been further damaged. The hole is larger than last recorded." She switched on the oxygen over Brandi's head, which forced air into her lungs, as well as sucked it out and recycled it, trying to refresh stale air so that her almost non-existent breathing picked up. Meanwhile, she hooked Brandi up to a portable lung machine that would inflate and deflate her lungs for her at a pace that would imitate normality.

More readings showed that the oxygen stabilized her lungs. Even London could see a bit of color returning to her white lips. But they both knew there was little they could do for her heart.

"Look," Bella Morte said, aware of London for the first time since entering the hospital, "why don't you get to the bridge? There's nothing much you can do here. I'll see if the computer can assess her condition in more detail and find out if there's a drug that will help. I'll call in a report when I know more."

As London headed towards the elevator, she met Andre. He put his arm around her shoulders and she looked up at him. "What happened? Were we all out?"

"Looks that way."

"Is everyone accounted for?"

"All but Emery and Bardox; they didn't check in. Renata is likely already on the bridge and scanning the station for them now. Bill's checking life support systems so we'll see what he has to say."

"Andre, what could have happened? We have backup systems. The computer didn't even warn us of an impending imbalance of gasses in the air so we could do something about it. What's going on?"

"I wish I knew," he said.

They reached deck one and entered the bridge to find everyone there but the two in the hospital, and Emery and Bardox.

Bill was saying, "And it looks as though the life support failed on some basic level."

"How the hell could that happen?" Akako snapped.

"Yes," Renata added, "I'd like to know that as well. These systems are set automatically to sustain human life. And what about the backup systems?"

"That's what I don't get," Bill said. "The diagnostic says they are all functioning properly. The computer recorded that they shut down for three hours, and then restarted automatically. And the warning didn't come on."

"How do you know your readings are accurate?" Renata challenged.

Bill stiffened. "Because I know my job."

"Have you been doing regular maintenance on the systems?"

His voice grew tense. "Of course. I do my job."

"I want to see the records for myself," Renata said but had already turned away. "Computer, bring up maintenance records for life support systems."

"Visual or audio?"

"Visual."

Felicity turned to her brother. "Before we all passed out, you were checking the bio levels. Do you think you could have hit the wrong button accidentally?"

Bill felt defensive. "I didn't hit any buttons. All of the bio levels were within normal range, so I didn't touch the panel at all. I was just down there to investigate the lighting, because ever since we've been circling this planet, the lights have been malfunctioning, and this was the first chance I'd gotten, but that has nothing to do with the air."

"We need to run a more complex diagnostic, Felicity said.

"I agree," Renata told them, who had just scanned the maintenance records and apparently found them acceptable, although no apology was forthcoming. "Both of you go check that system from top to bottom right now. I want every chip tested because I do not want a repeat of this situation."

As they left, Renata called over the com system, "How's Brandi?"

"Stable," Bella Morte said. "There's a drug listed in her chart that she uses which likely will help her heart get back to normal, or at least enough for another operation, but I'm not sure, there's been

both heart and lung damage because she was deprived of oxygen so long—she has a heart condition, a hole, and the drug won't cure it but may stabilize her. Anyway, the drug is experimental and she's been using it for a year without authorization. The computer can't come up with other possibility."

"Alright," Renata told her, "I'm giving you authorization to try it. Take it slow, see how things progress."

"Of course she'll take it slow." Akako snapped. "Are you questioning her competence too? You're questioning everybody."

"No, Akako, I'm giving Bella Morte an order to—"

"She doesn't need orders. She's fully trained—"

Helmet interrupted, "Ladies, how about you take this outside." When no one laughed at his archaic joke and the only response was a scowl from both women, he said, "We've got bigger fish to fry here. Besides the system problems, Bardox and Emery are missing. The station's scanners don't register them. Maybe they're dead. I'll lead a search party to find their bodies."

"Alright," Renata said, annoyed with Helmet's negativism, with his assuming command when command was hers. Annoyed with everyone. Something was seriously wrong and she didn't know how to find out what had put them all in jeopardy. "Andre, London, you're with Helmet, and I want everyone reporting in at five minute intervals until we know what's—"

"I think I know where they are," Akako said. "I'm picking up two life signs on Planet #666."

"What?" Renata yelled, and everyone crowded around the control panel to peer at the image monitor. "Who the hell took them there?"

"Nobody," Felicity called on her way to the engineering room. "I checked the ports throughout the station and discovered that while it wasn't recorded on the main computer—and it looks as if that was intentional—the backup system shows that the door of the shuttle bay opened at approximately zero nine hundred hours. I've scanned the bay and one shuttle is missing."

"The bastards shuttled themselves to the planet." Helmet said what all of them were thinking.

"Open channels to that shuttle," Renata demanded, her voice tense with barely suppressed fury.

"This is Renata Henderson, head of security on station G7. Professor Claude Bardox and Emery Peterson, report in, now."

A crackly voice said, "Good afternoon, Ms Henderson. Renata. We've been expecting your call."

Bardox stared at his quick-frozen samples as he spoke. He'd fiddled with the com unit and wasn't sure it would work, but the proof was in the voices. "And yes, of course we're on the planet's surface. Presumably you knew that."

"How would I know that? I along with the rest of the crew was unconscious when you stole the shuttle."

"Really? And how is that? You were all perfectly fine when I left. And I do take exception to the notion of 'stealing' a shuttle. I borrowed one. It was, alas, another emergency, and based on my failure to convince you the last time, I saw little reason to go through channels."

"The reason is simple, Bardox: You're in breach of station rules. You stole equipment and you will be sent to the brig upon your return."

"Yes, well, speaking of our return, while I myself am delighted to remain on Planet #666 indefinitely due to the infinite cloning possibilities here, or let me qualify that—remain here as long as we have air—Emery is rather upset. The poor fellow might need medical attention; he seems to be having a nervous breakdown, and has begun hallucinating. Perhaps you wouldn't mind getting started on rescuing us."

"If you could fly the shuttle down there, you can fly it back."

"Ah, but there's the rub. The shuttle is, I fear, incapable of flight."

Renata paused, feeling the blood boil in her veins. "Are you telling me that you've damaged a shuttle?"

The pregnant silence in the room spoke of everyone's skill with basic math: G7 had a crew of eleven people, and two shuttles, each of

which could carry a dozen people in an emergency, no more. But in reality a shuttle was best equipped to transport and sustain six for maximum efficiency.

"Unfortunately, we were forced to crash land," Bardox finally admitted.

"I say let them rot there!" Helmet snarled.

Akako nodded her head in agreement and said, "You got my vote."

London, fearful that the consensus would win this argument and vengefulness lead to bad decisions, said, "Well, we can't. They're part of our crew, no matter how stupidly they've acted. We can't just let them stay there until their air runs out and they suffocate."

"Indeed, Miss Jefferson, you have voiced the non-plebian point of view," Bardox said, yelling because of the racket Emery was making by pounding on the shuttle door for admittance.

"What's that noise?" Akako asked.

"Well, as I mentioned, I fear Emery is, as they say, losing it."

Felicity stated the obvious over the com system, "We need that shuttle. Repairs can be made, must be made, and we need to bring it home."

Renata said in a tight voice to Bardox, "As much as I'd prefer to let you both die, unfortunately, rule number eight-zero-nine says that any away personnel who are in danger must be rescued if the station crew can do so without endangering either themselves or the station."

"I believe we fall under that rule," Bardox shouted.

"And rule number one-one-seven requires that one shuttle per six people be available at all times.

"Well, that does make sense," Bardox said in a bored voice.

"Help! Let me in! He's out here with me. For God's sake, let me in!"

"What was that?" London asked. "Didn't he say 'he'?"

"Merely Emery," Bardox admitted. "I've put him outside the shuttle because, well, his loss of control is not only unpleasant, but I feared for my safety and that of the com system. I'm not a medical man but I have deduced that he is prone to psychosis. I suggest you

come here at once—and for God's sake, bring some anti-psychotic medication—because otherwise, he might hurt himself and—"

Suddenly the shuttle's com system sizzled as if it were shorting out. Then communication with Bardox died.

"What the hell?" Akako said, pressing buttons like crazy, trying to get Bardox on another channel, but all channels showed up as "No reception."

"Well, that's just great." Andre said. "The fools are down there, we have to go get them, one of them might be violent, and now we can't even communicate with them."

Helmet said, "Wouldn't surprise me if he cut the thing off. Like he cut off our air."

London reminded him and everyone else on the station, "We don't know what happened with the air. It's not only premature but also unfair to blame Bardox and Emery without any proof. The life support problem could be a coincidence—"

"Yeah," Akako snapped, glaring at her. "Why are you always on the side of coincidence?"

"And until we know for sure," London continued unperturbed, "we have to treat it that way."

"Right," Helmet said sarcastically. "Bardox and Emery leave and about the same time life support malfunctions."

"He's not a pilot. Neither of them are. They could have given bad commands, pressed wrong buttons."

"From the data we have here," Bill said over the com system, "it looks as if the life support shut off before the shuttle left the station. In which case, how come Bardox and Emery weren't affected?"

London reminded them, "That doesn't preclude a coincidence."

"Look," Renata said, exasperated, "it seems as if we have to go get these jerks. They've crashed one of our two shuttles, so this is not a good situation. And that damned planet is not the easiest place to fly. Bill. Felicity. You two are in charge of flying the shuttles. Will either of you volunteer to go down and get these morons and check out the damage to the shuttle?"

"I'll do it," Felicity said.

"No, I'll go," Bill said right away.

"Bill, I was there before."

"So was I."

"Yes, but I was there with Bardox and Emery, and recently. I know where they've landed and what the terrain is like in that area, and all the conditions in the air. I'm best qualified for this."

"That's not logical, sis."

While they argued over the com system, Renata asked Akako, "Do we have their exact coordinates?"

"Yes. And... there's something else. I... I don't know how to read this but... it looks like there's a third life sign."

As despair settled over him, Emery had ceased banging on the shuttle door. Bardox wouldn't let him in, but that wasn't the entire reason for his silence. The other was the presence he felt, out there, in the darkness, a shadow darker than even that near-absolute black of this planet. He knew someone was there. He felt it in his bones. And he knew who that someone was.

Pulling his knees to his chest, Emery curled himself into as much of a ball as he could while hanging onto the shuttle for dear life. Still, he wouldn't put his head down. He wanted to see, and to hear. He recognized the sounds as footsteps and breathing, even amidst the howling of the fierce wind. Maybe, if he was quiet enough, Jason X wouldn't know he was there, partially under the shuttle, hidden, barely taking in air and letting it out, harmless.

Inside the shuttle Bardox used a temporary life support bubble to surround both him and the samples. He sterilized the air then within that safe environment, placed the case with the samples into a completely sterile case he had brought from the station, and used his hands through the gloves in the openings. Or at least one hand. Damn the artificial limb! It had always been his downfall. Every time he tried to work with it, the thing could not be counted on. Which is why he needed an assistant in the first place, that and someone to do the grunt work.

He opened the vial by holding it steady in the artificial fingers and managed to extract tissue with his good hand which he placed in a Petri dish that he then sealed and inserted into the small acceleration chamber which would propel growth. He was about to do a second sample, since the chamber had room for only two dishes, when the shuttle rocked back and forth, then shifted to the right, nearly toppling him and his experiment. Disregarding his own safety, he grabbed the case and tried to balance it. In fact, the second sample missed the Petri dish completely and was lost for research purposes. Thankfully he had one more vial with enough for two dishes left.

The shuttle shifted further to the right, and now rested at a definite slant, sending everything including Bardox sliding to the left. "Dammit Emery," he shouted, "I'm working. You're destroying the experiment."

When the shuttle shifted even more, he sighed. He'd have to go have a word with Emery, perhaps let him in. Anyway, his hands would be helpful with the second Petri dish.

Bardox placed the isolation chamber in what seemed the most secure spot near the nose of the shuttle, which wasn't shifting as much, then sealed the box. He straightened himself with a further sigh of frustration, heading up towards the back of the shuttle, a steep slope, to the door.

"I'm not happy about this," Bill said. "I should be the one going."

Felicity smiled her radiant smile at her brother, loving him so much for his concern. "Listen, stud, you gotta stay here. What if something happened to you? Where would all the girls on this station get some?"

"What about you?"

"I don't fuck where I live, you know that."

"Except for Helmet."

"Oh, well, what can I say? We'd just left Earth II. I was demented." Suddenly she felt sad, not about Helmet, but over Stanislav.

Bill could read her emotions as well as he could his own. He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a quick hug. "Hang in there, sis. Things will get better."

"Maybe," she said in a small voice, looking at her brother. "I miss him. We could have had a life together."

"Renata to Bill and Felicity. Have you two decided who's rescuing the morons?"

"I am," Felicity said.

"Better get your butt into shuttle two. Those guys are running low on air, not that I won't be choking the air out of their lungs when they get back here."

Felicity said to Bill, "Look, I'd better go. Those two have some spare air in the shuttle, but they might not know how to access it. And we'd better make allowances for the unexpected."

Bill nodded. "You have all the equipment to do a diagnostic on the shuttle?"

She nodded.

"Here. Take this." He handed her his personal scanner, a computer the size of his thumb that he'd built himself to find heat and light sources in small places, like bacteria under rocks or in machinery.

"Thanks."

"Just bring it back in one piece." he said sternly. "It's the only one of its kind."

"Like you," she said, squeezing his arm.

Bill went with her to the shuttle bay. He worked the controls in the glass room while she entered the remaining shuttle, released it from its moorings, and prepared to depart. "Okay," she said over the com system, and he pressed the button to release the seal on the door to space, not bothering with a timed delay.

As the shuttle floated forward and up, he pressed the visual for the cockpit and saw Felicity navigating with the same precision that he would have navigated. Suddenly a ghostly white filter covered the screen as if the image would fade to oblivion. He blinked and it disappeared. "You alright in there?" he asked anxiously.

"Fine. See you soon."

"You better," he said, experiencing a wave of fear that engulfed him.

Once the shuttle had left the bay and the bay door closed, the room filled with gasses that sustained human life, and Bill left the safety of the glass control room.

He walked to the elevator that would take him back up to the station. He would run a more detailed diagnostic of G7's life support system; although by now he was certain that the system had been tampered with. And he knew just who he would confront when they returned to the station.

Emery had felt the shuttle keen, then slide again, lifting the left side, which is where he had positioned himself. His arm stretched up into the air to hold onto the landing gear and his legs were still wrapped around it so that he hung like a fruit from a tree. He unhooked his legs, dangling from the landing bar, but now his body was exposed. This was horrible! If he skittered to the other side of the shuttle, it would probably slide further and he would be crushed to death.

He knew Jason was out there, coming for him, he could feel the distance between them closing as if it were a vice pressing him in the chest. Was that breathing again? Could it be breathing? It was getting louder.

"Emery, if you've calmed down, you may re-enter the shuttle now."

The voice came through his com unit, but he sensed it originated above him, in the doorway, which had opened partially. The dim emergency lighting coming from the inside of the shuttle barely touched the gloom outside.

"Emery? Are you there?"

Terror gripped him. He felt afraid to move, afraid of giving away his position. Couldn't Bardox sense Jason, as he could? Couldn't he tell that something was very wrong here?

"Emery, I know you are right below me. I see your legs."

Damn. Bardox had thrown his whereabouts out into the wind. Surely Jason X could hear that. Now he knew where Emery was hiding.

"If you do not come within five seconds, I shall be forced to shut the door to keep out the dust and leave you to the elements."

Bardox would leave him here, with Jason so close.

"Three, two, one—"

"Wait." Emery shouted, struggling to release his grip on the landing gear with arms that had fallen asleep. "Wait, wait, wait!" he called.

He dropped to the ground, dust springing up all around him, and hauled himself to a standing position, waving frantically, looking up at Bardox, whose head was not turned down in his direction at all, but positioned so he was staring straight ahead. Emery could not see Bardox's eyes through the visor, he could not even see his face, but he followed where Bardox's gaze must have been aimed.

Out of the gloom stepped an imposing figure, flesh darkened by Planet #666's black soil contrasting with metal that glinted only mildly in the shuttle's dim lighting.

A small sound came from Emery's mouth, not a cry exactly, more a tortured exhalation. Suddenly he heard a sound above him; Bardox had started to shut the door.

"No," Emery cried, leaping up off the ground as the shuttle door rose upward. He grabbed onto the rising door at the side and had just enough room to get one arm through. He clutched at anything inside, anything that would keep him anchored to the shuttle until he could get his balance as he dangled in mid-air again. His hand connected to something and he held onto it for dear life.

Bardox could not believe what he had seen: Jason X, alive and walking. The man was indestructible. This development boded well for the experiment. Yet that thinking was replaced by a more basic reaction as he watched the giant stride towards the shuttle. Bardox's reaction was unusual for him: pure instinct forced him to close the shuttle door. He would try to reason with Jason X, of course, but through the door. That made the most sense. After all, one of the pre-eminent scientific principles of the twenty-fourth century was that

when dealing with the unknown, extreme caution should be exercised.

Damn. The door would not close fully. The fool Emery blocked it with his shoulder, and his hand had reached in and clung to Bardox's artificial arm. Bardox struggled to pry the gloved fingers from his prosthetic, and could get one up but it took all his strength and the minute he tried to pry away another the first clamped around the arm again. Over and over they repeated this, but all that came to an abrupt halt when Emery's long, haunting scream filled Bardox's ears.

Jason X stood over Emery as he dangled in the air, holding onto whatever it was inside the shuttle as for dear life. The man was huge, a giant, muscular beyond belief. Despite the black fog, from this height, Emery was level with and staring straight into those pale blue emotionless eyes. Eyes cold as death, that spoke of hatred so pure and indiscriminate that Emery found he could not breathe in the face of what emulated the purity and objectivity of science itself. And was remorseless.

Still, some part of him reverted to the most human of reactions: despite a sinking feeling in his stomach, he wanted to try to make contact, "Hello, my name is Emery Peterson. I... I work in genetics on space station G7, from Earth II, which revolves around this."

Jason X moved at the speed of light, it seemed to Emery. He grabbed at the dangling body, a hand snaking his waist as if he were a doll, and yanked Emery backward, hard, causing him to scream.

Inside the shuttle, Bardox screamed as well, as he felt his artificial arm being tugged from its socket. His good hand gripped it, struggling to hold onto what belonged to him.

Another yank and Jason had Emery ripped from the safety of the shuttle door, his feet still off the ground, his gloved fingers still clutching the hand that led to the metallic thing that part of his mind registered as Bardox's prosthetic, now no longer connected to the professor's body. Emery held it out like a weapon.

Instinctively, he bashed Jason X on the head with the arm, only to hear the metal strike something hard. He did not know if it was the mask over his face that the arm made contact with, or the skull, but he was sure of one thing: his effort brought such a flash of violence to

those pale eyes that Emery shook his head, as if apologizing, trying to make right what could never be made right again.

Jason's arm whipped back then suddenly snapped forward. Emery flew through the air. His face smashed into a large boulder and instantly he knew that he'd broken his cheekbones, crushed his sinuses, shattered his nose, and splintered the front of his cranium as his head slammed against the inside of his helmet and the shatter-proof visor spider-webbed. A few ribs in his upper rib cage snapped as well, although that hardly mattered because the pain in his head became all encompassing. In an instant, he felt his brain swell.

The instant shock of impact was quickly followed by the agony of broken head bones. He slid down the boulder to the ground, sobbing. But before he had time for a full-blown scream of pain, Emery felt himself lifted high into the air again, this time by the neck, thick fingers wrapped so tightly around his throat that they crumpled the metal that connected the helmet to the suit he wore, pressing beyond that and against his windpipe, cutting off his air.

Against the pain and terror, Emery struggled to cry out. The only sound that came from between his lips was the gurgle of blood. Maybe his death would be quick. He hoped so. But whatever hope he had entertained was dashed instantly as his legs were bashed against the boulder as if he were a doll in the hands of an angry child that insisted on breaking the tibia and fibula of both calves, and the femur in first his right leg, then the left.

Emery was on the road to loss of consciousness from shock and pain, but he took a detour. To his horror, this Neanderthal switched hands like a clever ambidextrous chimp, and Emery now faced his executioner again. From his belt Jason X extracted a long flat knife, the blade of which looked honed to a super-fine edge. Emery had never seen a knife like this, but in the recesses of his mind he already had an image of it stored from Bella Morte's grisly story.

Emery knew he mouthed the words, "Please don't," but no sound came from him. Not that it mattered. Jason X held frail Emery high and swung the weapon back and forth, cutting from lowest to highest and, despite himself, Emery could not help but admire the precision: first the toes that dangled one foot then the other, then both feet at

the ankles at the same time, the knees, the hip... All the while Emery felt pain that left him stunned to the point where irrational thoughts entered into his brain, which likely saved him from the overwhelming gut reaction of the sheer, unabridged terror that would have stopped his heart.

Jason X could have made a good surgeon, Emery thought, as he looked down and watched the heavy flat blade slice his mid-section away from his body. The physical tissue was sucked out of the exposed segment of suit into the atmosphere of Planet #666 and instantly turned to dust. Then his fingers, his hands, his forearms... Jason X seeming to realize that the suits were made in segments that closed off to protect the whole, because he sliced just below the connectors, leaving what was above intact, and waiting for the knife. Maybe he was having a good time, Emery thought.

During all this time Emery watched his blood, so much darker than he imagined it would be, gushing out and instantly transforming from liquid to solid to dust as it blended with the dense air.

The knife sliced higher, at chest level, for there was no longer a body below the chest that hadn't evaporated. The empty segments of the space suit had fallen to the ground to form a pile at the feet of the monster.

And sticking up in the middle of it all was Professor Claude Bardox's artificial arm. The prosthetic limb had somehow wedged itself upright into the ground, the fingers clenched into a useless fist of defiance, the middle finger sticking straight up as if to tell Emery, "Fuck you."

And fucked he surely was.

In numbed shock, Emery absently wondered which would be the final blow. Surely his consciousness would not survive with his heart gone? Finally Jason X used the machete like the Grim Reaper's scythe, slicing back then forth beneath the connector at the neck, and the remainder of Emery's torso flew away.

Only his head lingered, a lonely clump of broken and shattered bone, which housed a seeping brain already swollen beyond the danger zone, a brain with no oxygen or blood supply. A brain that

had never quite functioned perfectly but had, instead, found ways to hide from its own incompetence and the cowardice of its owner. But there was no more incompetence. No more cowardice. No more hiding.

The end came as a blessed release for Emery. Jason X punched his head into the air as if it were a soccer ball. Emery's eyes, still open, barely recorded the event. And with no fear, no emotion of any kind, and no rational thought to interpret what occurred, he watched the long blade strike the visor with brutal force. He heard or felt or imagined a whoosh of air as the helmet split in two, releasing whatever feeble awareness was left of the person who had been known as Emery Peterson. Any remnants of who he once was flowed out into the air of the planet that truly belonged to the Beast. And replacing it all was blessed nothingness.

Bardox, shocked by the loss of his limb, had stared in horror as Jason Voorhees dealt with Emery, slicing his assistant to shreds with a precision worthy of any geneticist splicing genes. But now that only Emery's helmet was left, in two portions, plummeting down to the ground, the show was over. Jason remembered him, and Bardox watched as the giant turned back to the shuttle and strode towards it with a speed that someone so large should not be capable of.

Bardox just managed to get the door closed and reinforced with the shuttle's interior air barrier which hardened gas molecules to the point where they became solid: he thanked the heavens that at least it still worked.

Jason slammed against the door and Bardox watched it dent inward. "My God," he whispered to himself, "what if he cuts his way in here?"

But the force of Jason's body to the shuttle did something else. It sent the shuttle tumbling sideways on top of itself, rolling over and over, and Bardox clung to the emergency lock handle, one of the few things inside that remained stable.

Suddenly, he felt the entire vessel hurtling downward through the air, and braced himself for the crash that came within seconds. The front end of the shuttle, which had remained crumpled but intact, now split into two segments. The rear separated completely and Bardox found himself outside the vessel, tossed clear of the wreckage. Miraculously, somewhere along the way he had landed in the captain's seat and the force of being thrown so far had been cushioned as the seat stayed with him, although he knew that tomorrow he would be bruised in a major way. If there was a tomorrow, he thought.

He had landed in a huge crater, one that stretched for miles, and ran at least a half-mile deep. He scanned the rim of the enormous dark pit but there was no sign of Jason Voorhees.

Once he felt safe enough to venture from his landing site, he made his way back to the wreckage with one purpose in mind: he must save the samples. It took some effort in the darkness to locate the remaining samples—the vial had cracked and the contents were no longer viable. Disappointed but not defeated, Bardox searched further through the pieces of shuttle debris until he found the isolation chamber. "My lucky day," he said: the chamber with its one Petri dish, the contents growing, showed the sample still intact.

A sound behind made him turn. The fuselage seemed to be emitting blue smoke. He was no engineer and rather than checking it out, he determined that he should get as far away from it as possible.

With his remaining good arm Bardox clutched the small chamber to his chest and made his way across the floor of the dust-filled crater. Once he had traveled what must have been a mile or so, he both heard and felt an enormous explosion. The ground quaked and he nearly lost his balance. He turned to see the fuel source erupting into the sky with a spinning silver flame that might have reached as high as the space station, for he could see it shoot up and pierce the atmosphere of the planet and ascend further out into space. Somewhere in the middle of the silver light he thought he saw a face reflected, one full of hatred, disguised by a metallic mask that glowed even brighter than the flame.

Jason X was destroyed. Thank the gods. All that remained of him was this precious sample, and Bardox knew he must guard it with his life. After all, once he got back to the station, this sample would pave the way to reinventing the universe.

SEVEN

As Felicity entered the planet's outer atmosphere, the turbulence seemed far greater than the last time she'd flown here. She held the helm firmly with both hands, manually navigating through the invisible pockets of dense air and vacuums that buffeted the shuttle until she was finally clear and well into the inner atmosphere.

She'd been way too busy to focus on it, but now she could more easily examine the strange swirling beam of silver that had shot past her in the outer atmosphere. It went all the way down to the floor of Planet #666. Whatever it was, it did not indicate anything good, and she figured it had to have something to do with the damaged shuttle, although what, she couldn't imagine. That shuttle's fuel source, like this one's, and even the backup nuclear reserves would not create such a disturbance. Still, she recorded what she saw into the shuttle's logs, so there would be a record.

Below was the dismal planet's surface. Bring here again reminded her of Stanislav. How could it not? Maybe this time she would find his body, but she knew she was deluding herself.

She had attached the ring to a chain and wore it around her neck, normally hanging between her breasts. But today, when she suited up, she had pulled the chain into the helmet with her, positioned so she could look down and see it: a concrete reminder of her lost lover. She opened her visor and reached down to pull the chain up so she could kiss the ring.

"I just want you near me," she said, her lips curved into a sad smile.

She checked the coordinates and had to recheck them because the shuttle was no longer in the position it had been recorded at from the station.

"Felicity to G7. I've got a change in shuttle one's position. Do you read that?"

"Roger," Akako's voice crackled over the system, "we see that too. The shuttle has moved. We're tracking the path. It looks as if it may have been falling into a crater."

The image monitor created a computer-generated scan of the planet's surface. "I see that from here."

"Here are the new coordinates," Akako said, and Felicity read them on the screen. She glanced out the pinhole window. "And that shaft of roiling silver light? Are you getting that too? It seems to originate from the crater, about where the shuttle is located. The light is shooting straight up, penetrating the atmosphere of this planet. Hold on..." She programmed the image monitor to check out the rear of the shuttle. "It's heading your way."

"We see it, and it's stopped short of the station," Akako said. In the background Felicity heard London say, "Thank God."

"Okay, we have a reading on the material," Akako told Felicity. "That's the fuel rod reacting with the atmosphere on the planet. The alloy has turned into... something else. Bill's not sure what. I don't think it will harm us, it's stopped a good ways from us, but it doesn't seem to be letting up just yet."

"Roger," Felicity said, still looking through the pinhole at the surface of the crater she was flying over. "I think I can pinpoint the shuttle wreckage, which is all around the fuselage leak. I'll have to put down as near as I dare and hope to find Emery and Bardox. It would be great if I could communicate with them."

"No kidding," Akako said. "What I can tell you is that we get two heat sources that are probably human near the explosion. One close to it, almost in the center of it—but that can't be possible. The other is further away, at these coordinates."

The coordinates appeared on the shuttle's computer screen and Felicity locked them in. For safety's sake, she decided to get to the human heat source farthest from the blast first, and then go retrieve the other. With fuel reacting to unknown planetary conditions, it was best to keep a measure of safety between her and the explosion.

The second figure seemed to be about a quarter of the distance across that deep crater on the planet's surface. Intense winds buffeted the shuttle and Felicity knew she had to land soon before the gale blew her off course. As it was, landing would be a challenge. Taking off was an even greater one, but she'd worry about that later.

She set a course for a mile ahead of the figure, or at least the direction in which he was heading, since he appeared to be moving, howbeit slowly. The shuttle flipped from side to side and she struggled to hang onto the navigational stick, totally unable to leave the landing to the autopilot. No matter how good a computer was, with winds like this, no machine could adjust as intuitively as a human being.

She brought the shuttle down onto the rocky surface with a thud and much skidding. Finally, though, it stopped pretty much in the neighborhood of where she wanted it to be. Something told her that this was not going to be easy—intuition again—and she decided she would not shut off the shuttle's power but keep it alive on low. The winds were worse by the second and they might need to find a calm pocket and escape while they still could.

"Everything okay down there?" It was her brother's voice.

"Yes, Bill, I've landed, all is well."

"We're picking up bad conditions."

"The wind is pretty fierce. I'm leaving the shuttle running, just in case."

"Good idea, sis. Get those two idiots on board and get outta there."

"My thinking exactly."

"Felicity," Akako said, "I've got weird readings on one of the life forms. It keeps fading in and out. Don't know what to make of that."

"As I was flying over the crater, I saw a pile of debris around the silver shaft. I'm thinking that one of these two is there, still alive, but not able to move."

"Be careful. You can't get too close to that fuel. We don't know what the planet's conditions are doing to it. It could explode and vaporize everything in the vicinity."

"I'll bear that in mind. Heading out the door."

Felicity unbuckled and moved to the door. She opened it and the whoosh was followed by blowing, black dust that obscured her vision and sent a fine layer of soot over the interior of the shuttle around the doorway. It also obscured her visor and the edge of her hand swiped at it like a windshield wiper.

Once she'd stepped out and closed the shuttle door behind her, she couldn't see a damned thing. Fortunately she had Bill's small scanner with her. In this poor visibility she could pass right by Bardox or Emery and not even see them, but the scanner would find any heat anomaly.

She began walking in the direction of the closest heat source, judging by the directional guide on the mini compass. Bill's little scanner told her that the heat source was there, dead ahead. She looked up but the air was dense with black particles, "Nothing ventured," she thought, and began walking with purpose. It took only about thirty seconds until they collided.

"Bardox."

"Indeed," he said, having lost some of his usual haughtiness. His body was bent over like an old man's and she could hear him gasping for breath. Instantly she saw that his prosthetic arm was missing, the suit closed off below the shoulder to protect the rest of his body. Finally something has leveled him, Felicity thought. Welcome to the human race.

She took his remaining arm that clutched a case to his chest and turned them both, heading back in the direction of the shuttle. Once inside, Bardox collapsed into a chair, the breath knocked out of him. After she had cleared the dust from both their visors, Felicity could see that he had been through an ordeal; that was certain. The most obvious trauma was the lost arm.

"What happened?" she asked him, pointing to the space where the arm had been.

He glanced at her with disdain. "Isn't it obvious?"

Felicity put her hands onto her hips. "I'd like the details, if you don't mind, I have to record this." She turned to the control panel and pressed "RECORD" on the log button.

Bardox waved a hand in dismissal. "We crashed, I lost my arm, the fuselage exploded, I started walking, you found me. More than that will need to wait until I have recovered from my ordeal."

"What's in the case?" She nodded at the box.

"My experiment, what else?"

She shook her head. The man really was an idiot.

Felicity called in a report that she'd found Bardox, but the channel she used had taken on some strong interference. She did manage to hear "You guys... out of there..."

"I'll look for Emery, then we'll lift off. Over and out."

"Emery is dead," Bardox said.

Felicity felt surprised. Did he believe that, or had he left his assistant to die. "We saw another heat form, near the wreckage."

Bardox looked upset. "He's dead, I tell you. Severed in two. I saw him with my own eyes."

Somehow this did not ring true, and Felicity decided that she'd better check it out for herself. Bardox had a tendency to present reality as he wished it to be, whatever was expedient for himself. Emery might be alive, and even if he were mortally injured, he deserved something better than being left alone on this bleak planet that did not support life in any form.

She went to the control panel and placed a lock on it, keeping her body between the panel and Bardox.

"Afraid I'll leave without you?" Bardox snapped.

"That crossed my mind," she said truthfully. "You've been less than honest."

"Is that necessary?" he said, as she keyed in the code without which the navigational equipment could not be unlocked.

Felicity ignored him until Bardox added, "What if something happens to you? I'll be stranded here."

"You were stranded before I arrived."

"Yes, but now I'm injured." His voice sounded forlorn and Felicity felt herself being swayed. She did not trust him enough for that.

"I'll go have a look, then we'll depart."

"I don't have enough oxygen."

She tried to hand him an extra oxygen pack to snap onto the back of his visor but he would not, apparently, release the container he held to take it. Likely he'd have trouble attaching it with just one arm; at best it would be difficult. She placed the tank at his feet. Let him struggle!

Instead of a "thank you," Bardox said, "You're wasting valuable time. You won't find him—the wind blew his body parts every which

way."

"What?"

"We need to get out of here as soon as possible. This planet is dangerous to human beings, treacherous in fact—"

She left him in rant mode, slumped in the chair, his eyes resigned but his mouth still running. He watched her exit the shuttle and close the door in his face.

But Bardox was already planning an escape, with or without Felicity.

First, he sat the container on the floor, picked up the oxygen tank, and although it took him a while, he managed to affix it to the back of his helmet. Now he had three to four more hours of oxygen. He was all set.

Bardox knew the universal code, of course, and would use it as a last resort, but he also knew the shuttle was being monitored closely and he did not want that code identified by Bill, who had created it and would recognize it instantly. He'd rather use Felicity's code, if he could figure it out. It would take him a bit of time, but he knew her code would be something personal and he'd counted sixteen key-ins. He'd studied the logs of every person on the station because you never knew who you would have to rely on for what; but he was not one to lean on others, and in this case he knew he could only count on himself. Felicity may or may not return. He would monitor the landscape for life forms, although the shuttle's computer did not possess nearly the precision of the equipment on the station. Still, he could tell when someone, or something, was approaching. If it looked like Felicity, fine. But if not, well, he'd flown a shuttle onto this cursed planet. He could surely fly one off. He just needed her code.

He moved to the navigational panel. Onehanded, he began to key in codes. Because he'd scanned the station's logs prior to the previous trip here, he knew that Felicity had changed her code recently. The code likely began with the name Stanislav, which he typed in. The seven digits following could be anything, and he keyed numbers randomly until his brain could establish a pattern that might fit her personality.

A crackly message came across the com system which he ignored, something about "danger." He knew all about the dangers on this planet, and one in particular.

Felicity's distrust of Bardox was replaced by her desire to get out of here as fast as possible. She had never seen a storm like this, even on some of the planets they called "dead." They were nothing but mountains. That and the dust, which swirled constantly as those bodies rotated rapidly.

Planet #666 had been named because it was numerically next in line of discovery. But it didn't take long for the station's crew to nickname it Planet of the Beast, from the Christian bible; its characteristics aligned perfectly. Planet #666 did not support life. Not just human life, either. Even the most specialized microorganisms that were known—extremophiles—which could survive in nuclear waste, volcanic vents, boiling geothermal geysers and deep inside rocks, feasting on chemicals and radiation that would kill almost every other organism in the galaxy, even these extremophiles could not survive on Planet #666. This planet was unique.

When the team first came here, dropped off at the station that had been set to circle the planet, they had made two trips down, both fraught with danger every step of the way. Bardox, London and Andre, the team leaders, had taken samples of the dust, the rock, the air, such as it was. They found no water, no traces that water had ever existed on this planet, and certainly no flora or fauna. They soon realized that nothing in the known universe could survive here. Felicity did not know the scientific ins and outs of it all. What she understood was that this planet filled her with a panic that permeated her cells. Space itself was hostile enough to human life, but somehow, death brought about by that darkness, surrounded by stars and planets, meteors and black holes, the movable feast of the universe, did not frighten her on a cellular level. Planet #666 did. And as she struggled along the harsh terrain, she also struggled

against a powerful dread that filled her being, making her sweat and tremble as if her life was somehow on the line.

The gloom hung thick as a curtain and she couldn't even see the shaft of silver ahead of her, but when she looked up at the sky it was easy to see that swirling metallic glow which pointed out her destination. She headed in that direction, stumbling over rocks, tripping more than once, almost falling a few times, she cursed the fact that she could not see at all and keeping her visor clean was a full-time job.

The little scanner was useless in this mess and she hoped that when she finally reached the wrecked shuttle, which was close to the edge of this crater, that the natural barrier of sloped land would provide enough of a protection to block the dust a bit and the scanner might be visible.

Felicity exerted an enormous amount of energy to go a short distance, constantly looking up at the sky for that silver beam of light—the only light—to guide her. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she reached the first bits of wrecked shuttle, a splintered door with the lower part of the Earth II symbol printed on it.

She had been right about the wall of soil acting as a barrier. Her scanner let her know that the ground was littered with objects, which she took to be more than rocks, very likely the remains of the shuttle, and if Bardox was telling the truth, the remains of Emery, or at least his suit.

Holding the scanner steady, she did a slow turn, trying to locate a heat source. A flash in the scanner seemed to come from the direction she'd just followed, but that couldn't be. It wouldn't pick up Bardox—he was out of the scanner's range.

For a good hour Felicity picked her way carefully through the rubble. The last thing she needed was some sharp piece of metal ripping into her suit and exposing her flesh to a vacuum that would suck out a limb in a second, not to mention exposing her to whatever else this planet had on the go in terms of toxicity. Her energy was giving out, and she'd found nothing. No sign of Emery. Maybe Bardox wasn't so delirious after all. Maybe the shuttle crash had broken Emery's body apart, split the suit in several places, and the

hostile environment had drawn out his flesh and vaporized it, and God knew, this wind could have swept away all traces of everything. Maybe that's what happened to Stanislav, why she hadn't found any more of him.

Suddenly she saw something on the ground, or thought she did, something familiar. She stooped carefully to pick it up. It was the shuttle's black box. What a find! It contained all of the recorded data, everything mechanical that had occurred from when the shuttle left the station until it crashed. It also held navigational information, environmental readings inside and outside the shuttle, and an audio record of anything that was said in or near the shuttle. They would need this to figure out events that had transpired here. She slid the fist-sized indestructible metal box into one of the large leg pockets of her suit.

Felicity reminded herself that Bardox's air supply would only last another hour and she didn't think he could manage the extra tank himself. Hell, her air supply wouldn't last more than two hours. And while there were a couple more spare oxygen units on the shuttle, she wanted to save those for emergencies, which they could yet run into trying to get off this planet, especially in these conditions. The wind seemed more ferocious than before, if such was possible. She'd better hurry back.

She used the homing device that aligned with the shuttle to track her way, knowing that it would be arduous, fighting the fatigue that gripped her, fully aware that she had to make it back there, she had to get the shuttle into the air, she had to return to the station before any serious thoughts of rest could intrude. And she needed rest. Emotionally she felt overextended, which led to bizarre thoughts: Stanislav was here, blended with the dusty wind of this planet. She could slit her suit open and rejoin him. She could finally find peace.

The drive to suicide was as strong as the drive to survive. Physical fatigue threatened to weigh her more heavily on the unhealthy side. With a new determination, she picked up her feet despite the depression that filled her, and tried to increase her pace.

Bardox checked the shuttle's computer. Felicity had been gone over an hour. Besides the extra air unit she'd left him, he'd found three additional units and knew he had more than a sufficient supply to get him back to the station.

Genius, which he prided himself on being possessed of, he'd managed to crack the rest of her code. He had been certain it would be something simple: the date of the year she and her twin were born to the second power. Likely she thought that was cute.

"Whereabouts of Felicity Lawrence?" he asked the computer.

"Unknown."

"A complication," he said. "At least she's left the power on." He would wait another thirty minutes and no more. After that, he would return to the station, the others and their complaints be damned.

"What are we going to do?" Bella Morte chewed on a cuticle. She sat at the com desk in the control room, next to Akako who was in charge at this point of the bridge. The others on the station surrounded them, except for Brandi who was still in the hospital. Bella monitored her condition via a computer on her wrist. Brandi was in stable but serious condition.

"There's nothing we can do," Renata said. "We're out of shuttles."

"There's the old one-man pod," Bill said, and the others turned to look at him as if he were speaking some arcane language no one else in the room understood.

"What the hell is a one-man pod?" Akako had spun around fully in her chair at the control desk to look at him.

"Something that existed before you were born. They were made in the twenty-third century, the idea being that in an emergency, a person could escape in what was meant to be a mini ship which could withstand the dangers of space travel and yet be small enough that you could store half a dozen pods in the amount of space a standard shuttle takes up."

"Shouldn't it be 'one-person' pod?" Akako said snidely.

"I think they didn't care so much back then about gender issues," Bella Morte said. "They were too busy trying to figure out if there was more than one life-sustaining planet in this galaxy."

"And do we have a one-man pod?" London asked.

"We do. I do," Bill answered. "I got fascinated with these antiques when I was a kid and found one at an auction of memorabilia from the previous century. Nobody wanted them back then and I bought it for a song."

"And it's here, on this station?" Helmet scowled. "You brought it here? Legally?"

"With my personal effects, yes. That plus everything else I brought aboard was still under the maximum weight permitted each individual, and met the protocol," Bill said defensively.

Renata shook her head. "I've seen photos of those things. Twelve foot tin cans."

"Hardly. They are outfitted with enough oxygen, water and food supplements, not to mention fuel, to last a month, which should get you from here to anywhere else."

"But it doesn't sound like it has the capacity to land," Andre said.

"Or take off again once it has landed. Or to pass through the turbulence that a planet like The Beast emits," Akako said, her voice filled with the skepticism that almost everyone else felt.

"Strangely enough," Bill told them, "the pods are amazingly strong. They were able to build them with reinforced titanium and boron and a couple of other primitive metals and I'd bet it's as solid as any shuttle we have in the fleet now."

"Okay," Renata said slowly, "so you're proposing we take this pod and go to the surface of Planet #666 and do what? How does that help?"

"Well, I can take a light transmitter and that to beam back messages in the old Morse code."

"Anybody here know Morse code?" Renata asked.

Everyone shook their head or said "No."

"You mean there's no com system aboard?" Akako asked, flabbergasted.

"Uh, well, I didn't get around to installing one yet."

"Like, how useful is that?"

"Anyway," Bill continued, knowing this was a losing argument but not being able to stop himself, "I can print out simple codes so you guys will know what's happening, if everybody there is alright, if they've encountered problems. If the shuttle Felicity took is malfunctioning, together we can fix it and get her and Bardox and Emery out of there before those guys run out of air. And we can do a diagnostic of the other shuttle to see how damaged it is, and what we need to do to repair it."

"And if something should happen to you?"

"Nothing will happen to me."

"If something should happen, we lose not only Felicity but you and then the station has no engineer, and no fully-qualified pilot."

"Well, if you lose both Felicity and me, that means that both shuttles are gone, and the pod, so what's the difference? You can't get off here anyway. All you can do is send out a call for the closest ship to dock here and get you all off the station."

Renata shook her head. "Uh-uh. This is not a plan."

"But, we need to find out what's going on down there."

Bill sounded upset. When Akako said she thought the silver light was changing direction and the others were focused on that, London placed a hand on his shoulder, easing him away from the control desk.

"We know she's your sister, and you're worried. We're all worried. But the likelihood is that the planet's conditions are interfering with communications. There's a storm down there, a bad one, and we can't even pick up heat forms and can barely home in on the shuttle Felicity drove."

Andre, who had listened in, added what everyone else thought. "We don't know that anything awful has happened. Felicity landed alright, we know that, and she found Bardox and went off in search of Emery. We know that too. Likely she found him and they're waiting out the storm. You know yourself that taking off with that much crud in the air would be hard on the shuttle."

Bill sighed, and shook his head in the negative. He knew he was outvoted, and their logic made sense. And they were all probably

correct in their analysis. But he and Felicity were twins, with a connection he couldn't verbalize to anyone, certainly not to a space station crew he'd only known a few months. Maybe some of them would understand, like London.

While the others went back to discussing Brandi's condition, Akako voiced the merits of trying to create a hair-trigger pre-alarm mechanism that would act faster than the regular alarm, alerting the station's inhabitants to changes in air quality, Bill and London stood off to one side and he tried to explain it to her.

"I feel it. It's a special link between twins."

"I know. I've read about it. My first boyfriend was a fraternal twin."

"We feel what the other one is going through and I know Felicity is in trouble. I've had a premonition that this entire rescue mission is... I don't know... off somehow."

London said nothing, just rubbed his arm, trying to comfort him in some way.

"I hate being helpless, standing around doing nothing when I could be going down there."

"I know. We all hate that." As if to distract him she asked, "How hard is it to fly one of these pods?"

"Not hard at all. You could do it. The controls aren't a quarter as complicated as the controls on a shuttle, and you flew a shuttle in your basic space training, right?"

"Not well," London laughed. "Look, I don't know if Renata would go for it at all, and this is a bit premature, but why don't you show me the pod, explain a few things about how it operates? As we get closer to the oxygen depletion deadline, I can offer to fly down in the pod. Maybe she'll go for it, since I'm just a cloning specialist, not valuable like an engineer."

Bill looked at her amazed. "You'd do that, for me and my sister?"

"I'd do that for anyone on this station, Bill. To me, it's worth the risk to see if we can save them, but right now, we don't need to save them. There's still time, and we don't have any indication that anything's wrong except we're out of verbal communication."

"I've got a reading!" Akako yelled. "A life form, headed towards the last coordinates of shuttle two."

"There," London said to Bill. "She's alive, outside the shuttle, headed back. Don't worry, okay?"

Bill nodded, but somehow he didn't feel reassured.

As London turned back to the com system, he caught her arm. "Listen, let me show you the pod."

"Sure," she said, worried that maybe she shouldn't have encouraged him. The likelihood was, Renata would not allow her or anyone else to go to the surface in a pod. Still, if it would help Bill relax, knowing that someone else could do this, she didn't mind spending thirty minutes looking the pod over. And in truth, she was curious. What could a one-man pod look like?

Felicity felt more exhaustion than she had ever experienced. Her body seemed weighed down by lead, her legs barely able to pick themselves up one after the other and move forward. Every part of her wanted to just sit down and rest, but that way clearly led to death. She had to soldier on.

Before her visor the air resembled a solid black wall. The swirling dust had reached such a thickness and intensity that she had to keep wiping the shatter-proof visor and place both the homing device and Bill's little scanner right against the glass to even see them. Reading them was nearly impossible. It didn't matter because visibility was almost zero. As she held the homing device up, cupping her hands to protect it and keep dust off her visor, she managed to see the blinking light that let her know she had to correct her course fifty feet to the left. By the distance between the two flickering lights, she should be almost at the shuttle—

She bumped into something solid and knocked herself over. Damn. She could have torn her suit open. She should have not been walking and trying to read the compass at the same time. She struggled to her feet, muttering, "I can't wait to get off this damned planet."

She longed to be safely back on the station, in her quarters, refreshed and soothed by a nice long solar shower—and she might

even indulge in a water shower too. She'd switch on a sweet visual to entertain her while she drank a chocolina energy drink, warm, and see if there was any meat left in the real-food storage on the station—she could use some protein from the source, rare as indulging in that experience was, but shit, she deserved it. This planet was hell.

Making her way around the side of the shuttle brought her to the door, which she'd closed and locked when she left, insuring that Bardox couldn't get out and do anything stupid. Now, she punched in her personal code to unlock the door. The computer said something but the sound was too crackly. But the red light by the door told her that the code didn't work. She tried again. Same red light. Bardox had somehow changed the code and locked her out. How the hell could that be?

Terror gripped her. She would not let her mind contemplate what he was up to. Instead she banged on the door with her fists yelling, "Hey, prickhead, let me in." He should hear her through the shuttle's com system, and she yelled again. She wasn't even certain he could hear the pounding.

By way of an answer, the shuttle's power source cranked up a notch, sending waves out the back, barely clearing a path in the dirty air behind.

"Jesus. He's going to leave without me."

Panic gripped her, catching Felicity between paralysis and the desire to run screaming to the small porthole that allowed the captain to see through the pinhole inside. She opted for the latter, and worked her way to the front of the shuttle to press the visor of her helmet to the hole which, on the outside of the shuttle, was a two-inch rotating wide-angle camera lens. If Bardox looked through the pinhole, he could see her clearly.

Felicity mouthed, "Open the fucking door, you prick."

In response, the engines thrust higher. He wasn't going to let her in.

Suddenly, she had a plan, one that might save her life. She moved as quickly as she could towards the aft of the shuttle to a cargo hold bolted shut. The interior of the hold had controls within that were set

to maintain the same atmosphere as the interior of the shuttle because you never could tell what you'd be carrying.

Fortunately, being the good engineer she was, Felicity wore a well-equipped tool belt. She found the laser de-bolter and began taking the bolts out of the top of the little door, trying to steady her hands as she went despite the shuttle's power cranking up yet again, just about high enough for liftoff.

She undid the top and side bolts and was finally able to ease the door down enough that she could crawl into the opening that would just about hold two people. Once inside, she began to pull the door closed so she could re-bolt it from within when something, no, someone materialized in the gloom.

At first she thought it was Emery, but that couldn't be. He was so much larger than Emery. The dust was intense and she watched the large figure move toward the shuttle, towards her. The guy was at least six feet... Could it be? Could she allow herself to hope for a miracle? Had Stanislav been alive all this time? Maybe this was the heat form London saw! She did not spend a second on logic, wondering how that could be reality.

Despite hearing and feeling the engines reach maximum capacity, and knowing in the back of her mind that in moments Bardox would lift the shuttle off this planet and she would be stranded, Felicity jumped out of the small cargo hold.

Stanislav was there. She knew he couldn't be dead. She had to guide him to the hold right away so they would be saved together. She ran into his arms.

Only when she was there, holding him, feeling the form of the man in her embrace, did it occur to her that he wasn't embracing her back. She looked up, expecting to see the rueful smile and the gentle, sexy eyes she loved but instead saw something unexpected: a mask made of silver metal, with an opening. She saw pale eyes and a set mouth, features that she did not recognize. She had been so sure this was her lover. The shock of this not being so, left her unable to think or act clearly. All she could do was murmur softly, "You're not my Stanislav."

The giant lifted one arm and she watched the metal-covered fingers reach around as if to hug her. Instead, she felt a hard and fast pressure against her back, and the shock of sudden pain that coursed through her body. Something inside her broke. Something was being ripped out of her, from deep within her.

As whatever it was left her, the pressurized suit gave way, replaced by a hollow feeling. She felt depleted in some essential manner that spelled doom. The elements of Planet #666 entered her through the cavity where something vital had been removed. The planet sucked out the rest: her lungs, ribs, diaphragm, stomach, and liver, everything encased in the torso part of the suit. Before her eyes it all crumbled to black dust and blew away.

It was in the last second of her life, as her head fell forward, that she saw the ring of her lover at the base of her helmet. Now she understood what this one who was not Stanislav had stolen from her—her heart. At least her ghost would remain on the Planet of the Beast forever, with the spirit of her Stanislav. And that final, sudden awareness allowed her die in peace.

Bardox was ready for liftoff. The power had hit maximum levels, although the shuttle rumbled in protest.

Seeing Felicity's face in the window was a bit unnerving, but he had been already up to the fourth of five levels of power and to open the hatch he would have had to power down. Leaving her here would be best. She had enough air for another two hours at least, and she could survive. He, on the other hand, had an urgent mission and needed to return with his sample, his only sample, and get it to the lab right away if it was to survive and be useful for his project. There would be plenty of time for him to reach G7 and for someone else to bring the shuttle back here and rescue the damsel in distress.

A flip of the navigational arm and the shuttle moved forward, the landing gear beneath bashing against rock after rock that littered the surface. The dust was so thick that he couldn't see a thing out of the

window and even the computer image monitor was so vague as to be useless.

Bardox lifted the shuttle into the air to avoid some of the rubble; high enough, he thought, that he could pass the rim of the crater. The turbulence was staggering and he shifted to autopilot, knowing the computer could do a far superior job of it than he could at avoiding hills and mountains and flying debris. "Get us out of here," he ordered it.

"Destination?"

"Station G7, of course." He mumbled impatiently to himself, "Idiots, when will they program these chips to think like a human being?"

The shuttle took off, knocked from side to side and flipping upside down as it lifted into the sky. Bardox could see the silver beam rising from the planet's surface, reaching into space, at least on the image monitor.

"Time to arrival?"

"Approximately forty-five minutes."

He sat back and relaxed, opening the lid of the case to peer through the clear shatterproof glass at the Petri dish again. Yes, this would be the work of a lifetime. Every great innovation in the history of mankind had been paid for with the blood of others, and this would be no exception. Still, when he managed to find the perfect blend of genetic material, the world would be blessed with a being unlike any it had seen before. And Professor Claude Bardox would be the father who had given it life.

A benevolent thought struck him: although he did not deserve it, Bardox would mention Emery in his ground-breaking paper. A lesser role, of course, he thought. Still, the gesture of benevolence-to-come made him feel rather virtuous.

EIGHT

"So, this little thing can operate independently?"

"That's right," Bill told London, grinning as only the proud owner of an antique can.

"But what about maintenance? How do you determine if it's malfunctioning, and where?"

"The pod has a self-diagnostic."

"Pretty innovative for the time," London said with admiration in her voice.

"You bet. These babies were the cutting edge at the beginning of the twenty-third century."

"It's a shame nobody liked the design enough to improve it."

"Actually, everyone loved the design, and a number of people did try to upgrade it, but there was never sufficient funding to get it good enough for mass sales. Back then the focus was amalgamation. Their idea was that you pack as many people into a ship or a shuttle as you can, and make it perform a lot of tasks. The one-man pods were designed for individuals to explore space and that just never took off as a concept but for a few eccentrics." He looked at her. "Okay, eccentrics like me."

London laughed. "So, now that I know how to use it, how to navigate it by the little primitive computer, how the hell do you land this thing?"

"Ah, well, that's the tricky part, for sure."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"It has landing gear but they're just a pair of wheels really, reinforced metal. The best approach, though it's a bit jerky, is to let the pod hover above the landing site then sit her down by just lowering her. The wheels can't take much in the way of friction, so there's no point trying to ease her into a stop along a runway."

"And take off?"

"Same thing. Let her rise up and hover 'till you're safely off the surface, then you can accelerate."

"But how's that different to a shuttle? It hovers."

Bill looked sheepish. "Well, this is where you gotta use a bit of finesse. These babies weren't made to hover, but I rigged her with a modern mechanism, well, a modified one, that lets the craft hover, but only for about five seconds. After that, she'll fall."

"Great. So you hover and hope your five seconds aren't up?"

"Naw, it's not that bad. It's pretty easy, really. You gotta think of her as a kind of extension of your body. Whatever you'd want your body to do, or not do, that's what the pod should be up to. Think of it as jumping into the air. How many seconds would you be off your feet? You just gotta not hover the pod too long."

"A pod as metaphor for real life."

They both laughed.

"Attention, station crew. Shuttle two is docking at the shuttle bay. Security and assistant medical personnel report to shuttle bay."

That was Renata's voice and Bill said instantly, "Hell, I gotta go."

"Of course. Thanks for the navigational lesson."

"No problem," Bill said, leaving the cargo bay and jogging down the hall of the doughnut hole to the shuttle bay. En route he encountered Renata.

"I said security and medical personnel," she told him sharply, running the last length of corridor herself, with Bill keeping abreast of her.

"Well, you might need engineering."

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, knowing that he was here to make sure his sister was alright, and that it would take a lot of energy to get rid of him.

Once in the shuttle bay, they entered the glass room that protected them from the vacuum of space. Helmet was already there, as well as Bella Morte and Andre, who were both carrying medical kits.

Bill went to the monitors, and read the control panels. He pressed a button. "There are only two life signs aboard," he said, his heart rising to his throat. He had a bad feeling about this.

"We know," Renata said softly. "It's quite likely Felicity and Bardox. Emery was outside the shuttle."

They listened to the snap as the door to the glass room sealed itself shut, then the pause and a continuous rumble as the shuttle bay door

opened to space.

Bill alternated between checking the panels, the real-time monitor and looking up through the glass at the actual bay. "Something's wrong," he said. "The shuttle isn't moving towards the bay opening. It's going to crash into the side of the station. Felicity isn't piloting it —"

They heard a ferocious scrape and felt the doughnut hole jolt beneath their feet. Suddenly the shuttle nose appeared through the opening, way too close to the right side of the doorway, the power source side of the shuttle. They all heard the loud grating as the shuttle scraped its way into the bay. Then they watched helplessly as the shuttle moved too far into the bay.

"It's going to crash into the wall," Bella Morte cried.

The five held their collective breaths as the shuttle floated towards the far wall, which held the door that led to the corridor. Thankfully, that door was well sealed off from the rest of the doughnut hole, with its two cargo holds. But if the shuttle struck that door, it was likely the corridor would be breached, and those behind the glass would need to don suits to get out and back to the station. Unless there was worse damage, in which case... Bill didn't want to go there.

Renata glanced around and saw just four suits hooked to the glass wall, available for the five of them. Damn. Bill shouldn't be here. What if they had to escape for their lives?

Finally, to everyone's relief, the shuttle came to a halt, its aft over the landing pad, its forward just inches away from and pointing towards the corridor door.

It dropped several feet down, sending another seismic shudder through this area as it hit the floor hard.

Bill ordered the computer, "Close space port and reestablish life-support in shuttle bay."

He had no need to do this, since first of all it was automatic, and second Renata has already told the computer to do this by pressing one button.

The door to the shuttle bay that led into space closed and locked, painfully slowly in Bill's eyes. Within two minutes, the gasses in the bay altered and the red light above the glass enclosure door went to

green as the computer announced, "Shuttle bay life support re-established."

Renata was first out the door, Bill close on her heels, then the others. They waited and eventually the door of the shuttle opened downward to form a ramp

Bardox stood in the doorway, weaving, clutching a small container in his arms, or rather, arm, for Bella Morte blurted out, "Your prosthetic is missing."

With help from the gloved Helmet and Andre, Bardox managed to get out of the shuttle and onto the floor of the launch pad. Bill instantly leapt inside. It was obvious right away that there was no one else aboard, but still he checked every closet and cupboard.

Outside, Renata was saying, "You're in big trouble, Bardox. Helmet, escort the professor to the brig."

Helmet snapped on antiseptic gloves and grabbed Bardox by the arm.

"The brig? Whatever for? I barely escaped with my life, and I'm certain I'm injured. I should be taken to hospital."

"I do need to examine him," Bella Morte said.

"Helmet, escort Professor Bardox to the hospital with Bella. Once he's certified as being in good condition, throw him in the brig until further notice."

"My pleasure," Helmet snarled, eager for once to comply with his boss's orders. He'd always hated eggheads like Bardox.

"Wait!" Bill called, leaping down to the floor. "Where's my sister?"

Bardox turned and peered at Bill through the visor of his helmet, which wouldn't be removed until his suit had been checked for organisms as he exited the shuttle bay, and he'd passed through the decontam chamber.

Bill ran up to him and grabbed the geneticist roughly by the shoulders, exposing himself to whatever organisms lived on that suit. "Where's my sister?" he yelled.

"Take it easy," Renata said, and it took her, Helmet and Andre to pull Bill off.

"Alright," she turned back to Bardox, "where's Felicity. And Emery."

"Both, I fear, met an untimely demise," Bardox said.

"How?" Bill's voice sounded unnaturally low, almost an animal growl.

"Emery, the dear boy, perished when the shuttle crashed."

"And Felicity?"

"I honestly don't know. She left the shuttle to find Emery. When she didn't return, I left."

"You left my sister on the planet to die?"

Even before he'd finished that sentence, Bill lunged, breaking the hold Renata and Helmet still had on him, and began ripping at the suit, struggling to get at Bardox's flesh.

The geneticist fell backward and landed on his butt, with Bill digging at the helmet to get to his face.

"Bill, stop!" Renata shouted, as she and Helmet and Andre again pulled him off.

Bardox was yelling, "It wasn't my fault. She set the shuttle to leave at a certain time. I couldn't do anything—"

"You flew it down. You knew how to override the autopilot and navigational instructions. You let her die, you bastard." Bill screamed.

"Get him out of here," Renata said to Bella Morte, who with gloved hands pulled Bardox to his feet and out the door.

Bill, frantic, required every ounce of their energy to contain him. Finally, no less angry, but less physically resistant, Bill hung his head and his body began to deflate a little as both Renata and Helmet held him up.

"Take it easy," Andre, facing him, spoke as soothingly as possible. "Just take it easy."

"Helmet, get Bill to his quarters."

"But you ordered me to escort."

"I know what I ordered and I'm changing that order."

"I'm alright," Bill told them, "just give me some space, okay?"

"I'll give you space if you give me your word you won't go after Bardox," Renata said.

Bill, still catching his breath, feeling frantic, nodded.

"Let me hear it."

"Okay, I won't go after him, for now. Just let me go."

"To do what?"

"I want to go to the bridge and check the control panel and scan for life signs with the main computer."

"We did that already. The only life signs were on the shuttle and obviously the computer misread, since just Bardox was there."

"Which means the computer had a problem with the planetary atmosphere, or some other problem. I want to go and check some of the mechanisms in the control circuits." He looked Renata square in the eye. "She's my sister. If she's down there, I have to help her."

Renata stared at him for five heartbeats. She said to Helmet, "Take Bill to the bridge."

Bill began a protest. "I can get there on my own steam."

"Not in the state you're in. Do it," she told Helmet, who held securely to Bill's arm and led him out of the shuttle bay. "And you'd better put him through the decontam, since he touched Bardox. Hell, everybody needs to go through decontam."

Alone with the shuttle, Renata and Andre looked over the interior one more time. The shuttle's computer had a voice and visual record and she snapped out the tiny chip that contained it all. "I'll take this to my office and read it," she said. "The chip will tell the story—the real story. I don't believe Bardox for a second."

Andre nodded. "I'll stay here and see if I can get a localized scan on genetic material in here," he said from inside the shuttle. "That will give us DNA and tell us if Emery was in here."

"Good idea. We need to document all this. Sending someone to the brig is a big deal, not that I'd have to prove much. He did steal a shuttle and likely caused, indirectly, the deaths of two station crew. But everything we can piece together makes a stronger case. And I'll have to sign death certificates and I need to make sure everything is on the up and up." Then, in a modified tone, she said coldly, "I want that bastard to pay for what he's done."

Once the shuttle bay was cleared of human beings, and his energy returned making him aware of his surroundings, Jason X sensed only one left. It was not a conscious thought, but more he absorbed the fact through his finely honed senses that he was somewhere else now, some place not so harsh, a place where the tiny bots that roamed his system would not need to work as hard and annoy him from inside so much to bring him back again and again. He let go of the cargo door that he'd been holding closed with sheer willpower, in a death grip.

The metal hit the floor with a loud clank, but he did not care. He uncurled his body from the small space to his full height, which felt better. He could now hunt and destroy everyone who had made it their mission to control his fate since the day he was born. Eventually, he'd get them all.

"Who's there?" a voice called.

Andre, poised in the doorway of the shuttle, holding a small genetic code scanner in his hand, stopped dead when he saw the hulking form standing outside the shuttle's tiny cargo hold.

"Who... who are you?" The giant seemed to be flesh and steel, and Andre couldn't tell by looking whether the metal was a suit he wore or part of his skin. The odd mask on the face hid the bulk of his features; except for eyes so pale they reminded him of the Huskies he'd loved as a boy. Pale as blue ice, he thought, the kind that freezes you to death.

Andre pointed the genetic recorder at Jason X to obtain a reading. The eyes of the being instantly opened wider and the irises seemed to darken, the pupils turning hard. The blue ice had changed to form the ice of a glacier as the giant started towards Andre.

"Hey. Hey! Hold on there. This isn't a weapon, it's a—"

But Andre had no time to finish his explanation. Jason X knocked the scanner out of Andre's hand so hard it sent both the microcomputer and the hand flying across the room.

Andre looked down, stunned for a moment at the loss of his hand, fascinated by the blood pumping out of the vein, and that moment was too long.

Jason X hauled him out of the shuttle doorway and hurled him towards and into the wall of the supposedly break-proof glass room. The wall did not break, but it spider-webbed badly. Andre slid down it to the floor leaving a thick trail of red from the back of his head that had been smashed, and compressed forward, and flattened against his face. His dazed eyes instantly became glassy, and Jason knew he had destroyed one more of them.

When the man hit the wall a beeping began that grated on Jason X. He hated loud sounds. They meant people and people meant pain for him. Sounds that loud drove him crazy, totally crazy, and he just wanted to destroy everything around him. He placed his hands over his ears but that didn't stop it. The only thing to do to stop it, was to go to where the sound came from and smash it until it stopped. But he couldn't find that place.

Jason ran across the room and found it, the severed hand still holding it firmly. He stomped and stomped and stomped until the hand was a grisly mess and the small machine had shattered into millions of fragments, but still that sound went on and on.

Next, he went to the man and jumped on him repeatedly until his skull collapsed: blood and brain matter gushed in every direction. But the sound continued.

Finally, in frustration, he used both fists and bashed on the glass wall until the spider webs gave way and the wall shattered, the pieces crashing to the floor. But the sound did not stop.

Voorhees saw a big door and a small door and went to the small one and pushed himself against it, then backed up and bashed his body into it over and over until the metal dented and then buckled and finally he pulled the handle and it opened. Out in the empty corridor, the sound was there too. He turned and ran down the corridor as fast as he could, running and running to get away from that sound.

"I'm okay," Bill told Helmet. "You can go toss Bardox in the brig now. London and Akako will keep an eye on me."

Helmet looked at the two women. "Whose shift is it?" he asked.

"Mine," Akako said. "Why do you want to know?"

"So I can leave this guy here. We don't want him causing trouble."

"What kind of trouble can he cause?" Akako said, as if Helmet were an idiot.

"He can go after Bardox."

"Not if he's here with us and you're with Bardox." She'd left off the word "fool" but it was certainly implied.

"Renata told me to bring him to the bridge."

"Seems like you did that," London said.

Now Helmet looked confused.

"Warning!" the computer said. "Security in shuttle bay has been compromised."

"What?" Bill said. He checked the computer but there were no details.

"Detail the nature of the compromise," Akako said.

"Safety room wall is breached."

They glanced at one another. "That wall's indestructible." Akako said.

Helmet started towards the door. "I'd better get down there."

Akako tried to check the image from the real-time camera in the glass room but it wasn't working. "If the wall was breached, maybe the camera got broken?" she said mostly to herself.

London asked the computer, "Are there personnel in the shuttle bay?"

"Living or deceased?" the computer asked.

"What? Oh my God. Living."

"No living personnel."

"Dead?" Bill asked for her.

"One humanoid."

He looked at London. "Andre was down there when I left." To the computer he said, "Identify."

"Unable to identify due to the nature of the breach."

"I'm going down there," London said.

Simultaneously Bill and Akako grabbed one of her arms. "That's not a good idea. There might be contamination," Akako said.

"And Andre might need help." London pulled her arms away.

"Renata Henderson to all station personnel. We have another emergency situation, this time in the shuttle bay. According to rule number—"

"We know, we know!" Akako shouted. "You're in charge. What do you want us to do?"

"Remain where you are. I repeat, everyone remain where you are, and report in to Akako who has the bridge. Helmet, meet me at the shuttle bay. And bring your weapons."

"I'm on it," he said over the system.

"Oh my God." London sat and held her head with both hands. "What in the world could be wrong?"

Renata's voice ordered Akako to "Do a scan for life signs on the station."

Akako did this manually and reported, "Four males, five females."

"Emery and Felicity would make eleven, the entire compliment. Alright," Renata said, "that means no one is missing in action."

London heard this and rushed to the com system. "Andre, come in. Andre. Andre, where are you?" Then she said, "Renata, Andre isn't answering."

"We'll find him," Renata said. "Just stay where you are. Everybody, remain where you are. I'm headed to the shuttle bay."

Bill got busy with the computer's controls, trying to determine what went wrong, why the computer recorded two life signs on the shuttle. He could find nothing in a cursory examination of the system, and a full diagnostic would take too much time right now and besides, he'd need to do it from the engineering station, not the bridge. Since he was there he decided to scan Planet #666.

"What are you doing?" Akako asked.

"I'm trying to find out if Felicity is still alive. Bardox left her there."

"Jesus," Akako said. "Somebody should kick that guy in the balls. But that implies he has some."

Bill could find nothing on Planet #666 that indicated life, nothing at all. The fuel still streamed up into space from the location of the crash of shuttle one. He scanned the entire crater, all the way back to where shuttle two had landed, and he found nothing. Not a trace of

humanity. But the computer had recorded two life signs on the planet and two life signs on the shuttle. He had to know for certain what happened to his sister.

"Look, I'm going down there," he said.

"I don't think so." Akako told him. "Renata said to remain here. I'm in charge of the bridge, and that makes me second in command. You're staying here."

"That breach is a mechanical problem and I need to be there."

Akako pressed the button that locked the bridge doors.

"What in hell...?" Renata whispered as she entered the shuttle bay, but her question did not require an answer. It was obvious why the alarm went off, and even Helmet, who usually opted for wit or as much as he could muster, didn't bother this time.

She had her laser weapon out, as did Helmet, and they stood in the shredded doorway surveying the damage. Bells and alarms went off all around them while the computer kept repeating "Shuttle bay breach."

Renata walked to the control room glass wall, which had been shattered. On the floor before it, lay Andre, or what was left of him. The impact of hitting a wall that could not be broken, other than by a ship hitting it dead on had left his body flattened, but it was more as if he'd been run over. Broken bones cut through skin in every direction. Only his face remained intact, but clearly the back of his skull had made extremely hard contact with the wall. The effect was a parody of Andre's face, tongue protruding, and eyes bulging almost out of their sockets, a grotesque mask. There was no use feeling for a pulse and Renata didn't bother.

"Found his hand, or what's left of it," Helmet said, his voice a little too enthusiastic for Renata's taste.

"Good for you." She walked over to have a look at it. What remained was a mass of pulverized tissue. Carefully she stepped into the glass room and shut off the emergency sirens. The quiet of the

place after so much noise became deafening, but at least she could now listen to see if anyone remained in the bay.

"Check the shuttle, inside and out," she ordered Helmet, who stood immediately, warming to the task, and drew his second laser gun, holding the two in both hands like the cowboys of the New Romantic Age on the original Earth.

"Akako, I need another scan," Renata called her.

"Life signs again?"

"Yes."

While Akako was busy, Bill punched in a code at the bridge door, one he had programmed into the computer in the event that he needed to move around the station in a hurry. He was out the door before Akako could open her mouth for anything more than to say, "Renata, Bill just left the bridge. I think he's headed to the shuttle bay."

"Roger," Renata said, her voice odd. "Helmet and I are already here. All personnel remain where you are and Akako, institute a universal lockdown throughout the station."

"You want me to lock everybody in?"

"Yes, and do it fast. We have more than one emergency on our hands. And I'm not sure exactly who or what we're dealing with."

NINE

Bill did not head for the main shuttle bay. He knew it would be useless. Even if shuttle two was not damaged, from the way Bardox docked it appeared to Bill as though it would not be completely spaceworthy until some repairs were made, Renata and Helmet would never let him take it out. The main computer showed no life signs on Planet #666. He could not justify his actions, the others would not understand the fact that he needed to find Felicity, alive or dead, but acting on his emotions would never be condoned. He had to take matters into his own hands and find alternatives.

He used the universal code he had programmed into the main computer, albeit surreptitiously, so that he could access any lock on the station and even override the universal lockdown that now seemed to be in place. It didn't take him long to work his way to the cargo hold, right next door to the shuttle bay. He prepared the one-man pod for takeoff. The mini-shuttle could fly in space—he knew that because he'd taken it out during every R&R he'd had since being assigned to G7. And he knew it could land. And take off. But he wasn't so sure if the small vessel could withstand the battering that the elements of Planet #666 would subject it to. Still, he felt he had to risk it. Living with uncertainty was not his style. He had to know what happened to Felicity.

He opened the cargo bay door, using the handheld control he'd designed and punching in his override code. The door opened and the vacuum of space seemed to fill the hold, drawing the little vessel forward into the connecting tunnel that was needed here when ships pulled up to unload supplies or personnel. He didn't have to do much but steer. The entire front surround of the pod was space-resistant glass, and he glanced out the window at his left, looking at the crates of supplies affixed to the walls as he floated by them. Then he turned his attention straight ahead to the short connector tunnel that had always reminded him of a birth canal, and beyond it the darkness of space that he was entering, like going back into the womb. He hadn't even turned on the pod's power source yet but did so now, just in

case it wasn't working and he had to abort this mission before it began, before he was completely outside the station.

He heard yet another alarm sound, dimly, off in the distance. Whatever this new emergency, there would be time enough to find out about it when he returned.

The power charged up and disembarking proceeded remarkably well. The darkness surrounding G7 gave way to dots of white, stars flickering in far-off galaxies, and colorful spots that were planets revolving around some of those stars.

He didn't really regret that the pod had no com system. He'd meant to install one, but whenever he took her out for R&R, the last thing he wanted was to hear human voices, especially ones searching for him. Now he was relieved that he'd never gotten around to fitting the pod with a com link. He had an excellent excuse for staying out of contact.

Let them think what they would. He'd face whatever consequences there were on his return. Now that he was well clear of the exit, he aimed the hand-held control behind him to shut and lock the cargo hold, and then lay back in the reclining position the body required as the small vessel drifted forward and down, as if the dark planet below the station possessed gravity that was pulling him towards it. He turned the fuel output way down and let himself glide, conserving power, knowing he might need it to get off that hellish black orb, especially if the one-man pod ended up carrying the weight of two human beings.

"Professor Bardox, you're looking pretty fit. Except for your missing arm, of course," Bella Morte said. "But we'll have you fixed up in no time."

Bardox sat patiently while Bella fitted a new prosthetic limb to his shoulder, fusing the tips of the metal pin in the arm to the metal joint that had been implanted into his shoulder years ago. The laser took less than three seconds to accomplish its task. Now the arm could rotate as if it was made of flesh. All the while, Bardox sat impatiently

waiting for her to finish so that he could get on with his work, still clutching the case to his chest.

"Good thing we've got a few spares on hand," she said cheerfully, which made him grind his teeth.

"Yes, well, if one finds a good fit, it makes sense to stock up, as it were."

"There you go. Good as new. How's that feel?"

"Fine. Just fine. Now, I believe we're finished with this and—"

"It's weird, you know, that you can't use a cloned arm. Brandi told me once your body rejects them, even clones made from your cells."

"That's very true," he said, flexing the metallic hand, which worked as well as the last one, although his shoulder was sore from having the previous prosthetic ripped out of his body by Jason X by way of Emery.

Thoughts of Jason X made him realize that the tissue he's harvested could not grow indefinitely in this portable kit and he must get to his work station as soon as possible if there was any hope of turning Jason X's DNA into something usable.

"Do you have good use of your shoulder, where it connects?"

Damn this girl's interference! "As you say, good as new. Now, if you don't mind, I'll just retire to my quarters—"

"I don't know. Renata said we should all stay where we are. I think that means you too."

"Yes, but I doubt she means us to take that literally. My quarters aren't far, and you've got your hands full here with Doctor Williams. I'm just in the way. And I would appreciate a lie down—I've been through an ordeal, you know."

"You can lie down here, in the other hospital room."

"I'd prefer familiar surroundings. I doubt I'd feel comfortable enough here to relax. It's rather... antiseptic. And I do need rest."

Bella Morte looked around her at the pastel colors and soothing images on the walls, all designed to instill calm and confidence, as if seeing the hospital for the first time. "I guess you could see it that way... Look, I'll call Renata and see what she says."

"Oh, I don't think you should bother her right now. She seems to have yet another emergency to deal with, and I wouldn't want to put

her out with my simple and innocent request. Tell you what. I'll just lie here for a while and rest, that's probably the best approach. But if you could give me a small pain killer, that would be wonderful. My shoulder is a bit sore. The explosion, you know."

"Oh, it's sore? Maybe I should look at the connection—"

"It's not the connection, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout. I'm very tired, you see. The connection is perfect. I should know, I've worn dozens of these prosthetics over the years. And you've done a marvelous job of attaching it. It's the shoulder, you see. I do believe I've strained it a bit. Nothing serious, but with the trauma I've been through..." He tried to look forlorn but not so much so that the idiot would begin another full diagnostic.

"Okay. I'll just check the computer for what would suit your system given your body's present condition."

Bella asked and the computer rattled off an annoyingly long list of painkillers. Before Bella could choose one, Bardox said, "You know, I've had most of those, with limited success. If you don't mind, and only if you think it makes sense, of course—after all, you're the doctor—"

"Assistant medical personnel, actually. That's my second job only because—"

"Yes, well, perhaps one of the old-fashioned opiate derivatives would be good enough. I realize they aren't nearly as effective as modern pharmaceuticals. Still, I'm rather conservative in my tastes. I know they will help me sleep as well. 'To sleep, perchance to dream...'"

"Hey, that's Shakespeare, right?"

"Indeed it is."

"As You Like It?"

"I believe it's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'—"

"That's such a cool play," she shrieked. "I saw it at—"

"The opiate?" Bardox made a face that reflected pain.

"Oh, sure. Sorry. Morphine is on the list so I guess it's okay to give you a dose of that. It's just in here.'

Bella Morte turned to the locked medicine cabinet to scan her index finger, which would open the door. In a second too fast for her

to identify what hit her, Bardox managed to slam her over the head with the stool he'd been seated on. As he stared at her prone form on the hospital floor, he put down the stool and flexed his metallic hand again, saying, "Yes, you meddlesome fool, my new prosthetic is working just fine."

"What the hell are you doing?" The weak, raspy voice came from the doorway to the next room, the one where Brandi Williams had been in intensive care.

Bardox turned slowly, with all the time in the world. "Doctor Williams, you look ghastly. You really should be in bed."

From the startled expression all the way to the look of renewed power on his face, Brandi knew she was as pale as she felt. Her legs could barely hold her up and she needed her hands clutching the doorframe to keep her standing. Leaving the bed where oxygen was infused into her system made her lungs struggle for air. Her breathing grew worse by the second. Everything looked exceptionally bright, two-dimensional cutouts instead of three-dimensional reality.

Bella Morte lay unconscious where she fell. Brandi had watched from her hospital bed as Bardox hit the girl over the head. She knew she should try to reach Bella Morte, but stepping forward only caused her to stumble into a gurney. Using all the energy she could summon, Brandi held herself upright, attempting to project authority as she braced herself against the gurney, not wanting to fall at the feet of this man. "What are you up to?" she gasped, her tone not nearly as commanding as she would have liked it to sound. Her eyes traveled to the com unit on the desk, not ten feet away. If she could reach it, and call for help...

Bardox had watched her eyes and knew her plan, probably before she did. He reached over and turned the com system to "Off." Then he yanked the gurney forward hard and Brandi fell to the floor. "Oops, You really should be more careful, doctor. Your heart could give out at any moment, then where would you be? I doubt we can find a willing donor on the station, and apparently your records indicate you've refused a cloned heart or a mechanical implant. 'Do not resuscitate' I believe you wrote."

"How do you know my medical records?" Brandi wheezed, struggling to find an ounce of strength. Her brain felt as if a thick layer of gauze kept her from seeing her thoughts clearly and whenever she moved her head she grew dizzy. The room spun for a few moments, leaving her nauseous. She did a quick self-diagnosis and recognized that her body was not getting enough oxygen. Her heart was failing. Rapidly. The arrhythmia had increased to a frightening rate. She should have been back in that bed under the oxygen tent. Without intervention she could die, possibly within minutes. She did not know who would help her, but one thing she did know was that Bardox was a danger to everyone on this station, and if it was her last act in this life, she had to alert the others.

"I fear, doctor, that I must return to my quarters. I have work to do." He patted a small case sitting on the desk. He reached across the desk and snatched up the com unit, dropped it onto the floor and smashed at it with the same stool he'd used on Bella Morte's head. Then he picked up the case in his fleshy hand and steadied it with the metallic one. "Time, I fear, is of the essence for my experiment. Accelerated cloning is such delicate work, and a second of delay can change everything, but then I don't expect you to understand the nature of an experiment that will alter the course of human history."

He walked to the door, muttering to himself, "Now, what was that override code? Ah yes," He laughed at his own joke and punched in the code he'd stolen from Bill's personal log. "I knew this would come in handy one day," he said as the door swooshed open.

"Until we meet again, doctor, or is this a final farewell? I'll be putting the station crew to sleep again. I gather that the last time I did so had a deleterious effect on your health, for which I truly apologize, but I see no other way to work in peace. I suggest you lie there quietly and save your strength."

As he closed the door after himself he turned to say, "Undoubtedly you'll need it."

Brandi struggled to catch her breath, to calm her nerves. She reeled from the vertigo of lifting her head from the floor. A lifetime of discipline brought her enough mind over matter to shove aside the

physical symptoms for a moment so that she could analyze the situation.

She had heard Renata's call over the com system. The station was in danger. There were breaches of security, calls for life-form counts, which implied either too many people on the station, or too few. She had no time to even imagine what was going on, but instinctively she understood that Bardox was somehow responsible for all of it. And now she knew that it had been Bardox who had altered the gases on the station and sent them all into unconsciousness. And he intended to do so again, this time possibly sending Brandi to her death. For what purpose, she had no idea, but from the space suit in the corner and from what she'd overheard Bella Morte saying, it seemed obvious that Bardox had gone down to Planet #666. Again. And returned with who, or what?

"Think," she commanded herself. She knew the hospital had only one com unit, her brilliant idea to keep interruptions to a minimum. There was the portable unit she wore with her uniform, but where was her uniform now? Did she have the strength to hunt all over for it? Probably not, and what was the chance of finding it before Bardox changed the configuration of gasses in the air?

Another thought occurred to her. It wasn't the best option, but it might be the only one. Her hospital bed had a personal log attachment. She could record what she knew. Eventually someone would find it.

She crawled to Bella and it took incredible effort to lift the girl's hand and find her pulse. The pulse seemed normal, although Brandi had trouble concentrating, counting the beats for ten seconds and multiplying by six—she knew such weakness and mental confusion did not bode well for her heart. Bella seemed to have no open wound on her head, but had probably suffered a concussion. There was nothing she could do for her, she just didn't have the strength. And more importantly, she had to record something before Bardox altered the air again, in which case both she and the medical assistant would be unconscious. But only one of them might wake up.

Brandi dragged herself slowly and painfully back into the room where she had so recently lain. She knocked the floor pedal controls for the invisible oxygen tent so that rather than being directed to the bed it came her way. She could barely get oxygen into her lungs now; they were full of fluid. The bed that had held her seemed to be as high as the ceiling. It might as well be, since she had just as much of a chance of reaching it. Her legs would not hold her, and struggling, she realized she could not even get to her knees. Deep within her chest Brandi experienced a faint trembling within a hollowness, as if each heartbeat was weaker than the one before it, and the space between beats grew longer. Soon, only space would remain, fading her out of this life and into another. Only the oxygen pumping through her kept her going, and when Bardox altered the life support system again he would probably shut down even the emergency systems, with her in mind.

The log button rested on the side of the bed closest to her, thankfully, but high up the wall. The button had been pressed to "Off" so it could not be voice-activated, a precaution she herself had set up in the belief that patients who needed rest should get it, especially the more manic of the station's members.

She dragged herself to the bed and tried to crawl up the bedding to the button and press it. But even clawing her way up the cushioned surface, she could not reach that button. Frustration brought tears to her eyes, which only made breathing more difficult. She looked around for something, anything. On the bedside table stood a small bouquet of roses grown on the station that London had brought her. They sat in an unusually tall wooden vase—where London had gotten that, she wouldn't say, but it was obviously an antique, at least from the previous century. London was sweet. Sincere. And if Brandi had gotten to know anyone on G7, it would have been her. And now there was no time left even for regrets.

The table itself had leg locks and Brandi expended a lot of her energy unlocking each manually at the base. She took a moment to catch what watery breath she could and to let the room swim until her balance settled.

Finally, though, she grabbed one leg and shook the table as much as her diminished capacity would allow. It seemed to take forever, and she broke into a cold sweat, her heart heavy in her chest. Finally the table fell, and with it the flowers and the vase. Water and roses cascaded over her head to her chest and the vase struck her temple before she could get her hands into position to catch it.

The blow was glancing, and in her normal condition it wouldn't have fazed her. Now, with the blurring of vision she already suffered, and the dizziness, Brandi had to collect herself before she could even reach for it where it lay trapped between a table leg and her head. Finally her cold, nearly numb fingers curled around the vase's stem. She knew her strength was almost at an end so she acted immediately, hauling herself to a seated position, ignoring the pounding in her chest, the dizziness in her head, the hyperventilation of her liquid breaths. Moaning, she lifted the vase and brought it down onto the button. The pinpoint light went from red to green.

Brandi lay back on the floor exhausted. She could barely speak; her throat had become bone dry. Her finger landed in a puddle of water on the floor and she brought drops of moisture to her lips. She had little time left before her body would give out, before Bardox would poison the air.

"Brandi Williams, personal log, recorded today," she gasped. The machine would automatically date and time the log.

"It is urgent that anyone hearing this know that Claude Bardox is a danger to everyone on the station. He left the hospital against Renata's emergency orders to stay put. He hit Bella Morte on the head with a stool and she now lies unconscious in the main hospital area, likely concussed. He threatened me, destroyed the hospital's com unit, and apparently knows a universal code to open doors throughout the station. He took with him a small container that I believe he is using to grow genetic material he illegally obtained on Planet #666. He plans to alter the station's air again, leaving us all unconscious, so that he can perform what he calls an 'experiment' which he boasted will change the course of mankind's evolution. I can only suspect that he obtained material from a mutant life form on the planet that he intends to grow, and this could be a danger to

life, as we know it. I am fading fast. I doubt my body can sustain another reduced level of oxygen—"

Before she could finish, a loud pounding struck the door to the hospital, then again, and again. Each time it dented the heavy metal inward a little more. Brandi pulled herself forward not believing what she was seeing. "Someone," she gasped, "is trying to get into the hospital by breaking through the door."

Suddenly a sharp blade seared through the metal. Two hands covered in metallic gloves pushed into the opening and grasped the edges, pulling them outward, ripping the metal door up and down as if it were paper. The rip created a space that grew larger and larger before Brandi's hazy vision. She saw a face peer in, at Bella Morte, then swivel in her direction as if honing in on a warm body. Their eyes locked, hers warm, his cold, and the cold leached away the warmth. "It's a man," she gasped to the log, making no effort to control her tone. "More than a man. He looks to have metallic parts but his flesh, his cold eyes, are... human."

While she spoke, Jason X forced his way through the opening, into the room. He strode the five steps to the hospital room that Brandi was edging further into in fear for her life. "I... I don't know what this is," she said, her voice rising as Jason X towered over her, a gleaming metal weapon like none she had seen before in his massive hand. "What... who are you?"

Jason X raised his arm and the sharpness of the metal became apparent to her, just as the end of her life became a thing concrete, less abstract.

"I think..." she managed, as Jason X brought his sharp, curved weapon down into her chest, as she felt her heart pierced and torn in two, her watery lungs divided, her stomach severed in half, as she sensed blood bursting from her and then became aware that her erratic heartbeat had ceased, "I think you are my death."

As alarm after alarm went off, Renata and Helmet just stared at one another. "What now?" she said, rushing to the control panel

behind the shattered glass wall of the shuttle bay.

She read aloud the security breach on the computer screen. "It's the cargo hold. It was opened."

"But, who...? How...?"

"I wish I knew all of that," Renata said. "Look, you stay here, keep guard over the remains, and protect the shuttle. I'll check out the cargo hold. Damn," she said, staring at the control panel before she could turn away.

"What?"

"There's an emergency in the hospital too."

Helmet started to rush to the control panel but Renata held up a hand to stop him in his tracks. "The cargo hold. Did something come in or go out?" he demanded.

Renata pushed more buttons that flashed numeric codes onto the screen that she could easily translate. She ran a hand through her hair. "Something... somebody left."

"But we only have one shuttle, and we're looking at it." Helmet seemed totally confused, and Renata couldn't blame him. Every second things were going from bad to worse. Ever since Bardox and Emery had stolen the shuttle, crashed it, and returned with only one of three members of the station.

Suddenly a memory burst into Renata's awareness. "The one-man pod," she said.

Helmet twigged instantly. "Bill's antique. You think he took it out?"

"I know he did. He went looking for Felicity down on..." ... But her voice trailed off. She felt sleep that she could not fight overwhelm her, even as she watched Helmet fall to the floor of the shuttle bay. Part of her thought, "It's happening again." But knowing that did not help her, because there was nothing she could do to stop passing out.

"Alright, I give up," Akako said, slamming her palms onto the arms of the captain's chair where she sat. "I don't know what the hell's

happening on this station. Now we've got a cargo bay breach and a hospital emergency."

"What?" London said. "This is insane." She looked over Akako's shoulder briefly, then went to the com station and pushed on the announcement button that would send her voice to every nook and cranny throughout the station. "This is London Jefferson on the bridge. All station crew, report in at once." She paused. "Andre, report in, that's a direct order."

Renata had refused to say what they found in the shuttle bay, but London knew that Andre had been there, and stayed when both Renata and Helmet left. She suspected he was hurt badly and feared the worst for her lover.

Three seconds passed with no response, long enough for London to watch Akako fall forward over the control panel, and for London to experience herself collapsing backwards onto the chair she'd been standing in front of.

Claude Bardox made a quick call on the com system. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Dead silence. He chuckled silently, his shoulders quivering. Finally, he was alone on the station, at last, able to do his work undisturbed and undetected. He'd programmed the life support changes to the air for three hours, which should be more than enough time to do what he intended to do without serious damage to the crew, except Doctor Williams. But then, as he had always said, some blood must be shed for progress.

His personal lab and quarters were exempt from the reconstituted air, of course. And when he left here to venture out into the contaminated station, he would be wearing an oxygen pack, so all would undoubtedly be well.

The sample he'd taken from Jason X had grown exponentially, even considering that it had been housed in an accelerated-growth container. It was as if the tissue had a life of its own. Now, in the privacy and quiet of his lab, he could direct the tissue's final growth

stage so that it formed anything he desired it to form: an ear; a kidney; an arm for himself even! But he had nothing as prosaic in mind. No, he would grow something very specific, very special, what had been the focus of this experiment since its inception. If Voorhees was a super-human—and there was no doubt about that—then a human being bearing the cells of Jason X would certainly become something greater than he or she had been before. They had tried this in the past, but of course, had done it all wrong. Claude Bardox would correct the faulty hypothesis which led to the disastrous experiment-gone-awry of Doctor Stein. He would alter that experiment and change the goal so that this time it would work properly.

Bardox removed the sample carefully. The nucleus of the cell was apparent as he viewed it through his high-powered microscopic glasses. It looked as healthy as any cell he'd ever seen. He checked with the computer, although he certainly knew by heart the parameters by now, and the computer voice rang out the conditions for guiding the cell to form the tissue he wanted. Finally he placed it in the regeneration chamber and punched the numbers, which came up on the screen digitally for the specific growth he wanted. "Are these numbers correct for the intended transformation?" he asked the computer, even though he never made mistakes with codes.

"Correct, Professor Bardox," it said, using his formal title as he'd programmed it to do.

The regeneration would take about an hour. While he waited, Bardox glanced at a specific medical record. But instead of studying it, as he had already done many times, he sat back in his chair, metal fingers locked with human fingers behind his head, leaning back, affording himself a well-deserved rest. If only Emery was here to prepare his restorative drink, but he knew he would have to "rough it" as they used to say.

He also knew that by the time he revived the others on the station, intervention would be too late. He would have accomplished his task and none would be the wiser. Only time would reveal the ripening fruits of his labor. When that fruit was picked, it would show Homo

sapiens up for the pathetic wrongly evolved species that it had always been by contrast with the new being confronting it dead on.

"Claude Bardox," he told himself, chortling, "you are indeed a mastermind. Nothing less than the father of a new species." How they would praise him, how humanity would alter. He could hardly wait.

Something had changed. The human he had sliced open had died as he was killing her. The other one was still alive—he could hear the blood pounding through her veins—but she was asleep and offered no resistance.

The things that lived in his system now raced again, coalescing in his chest, and he pounded his chest hard as if that could dislodge them, but it did not. It never did.

He stomped out of the room through the hole by which he had entered, sniffing the air, listening, and hearing something far away, something human, something needing to be made extinct.

TEN

The pod spun out of control. Never had the small vessel been subjected to the intense battering it received on entering the atmosphere of Planet #666. Bill had long ago assumed manual navigation, not that he was doing much better than the autopilot.

The little pod swung in circles, flipping end over end, all the way through the planet's outer layer. Once he entered the inner atmosphere and began to have a hope of getting the helm under control, suddenly the surface of #666 came up to meet him much faster than he could right the pod. Fortunately the makers had installed a kind of parachute that Bill had had the sense to upgrade, and he deployed it now, hoping that it would slow the vessel enough that he could stabilize the descent. The parachute did the trick and the pod began to float a mile above the dark surface. Bill quickly adjusted the navigational stick and had her level as she landed with a thud, sending shock waves through his body.

He checked the coordinates and realized he was pretty far from where shuttle one had crashed and also from the spot where shuttle two had both landed and taken off. A glance out the pod's wraparound window and he could see what he jokingly thought of as "inclement weather." The Planet of the Beast always seemed to have inclement weather. This, though, was exceptional and he could not see one foot outside the pod. It was either spend an hour or more trudging through the near-total darkness, buffeted by black soil, hoping to locate one of the two shuttle spots, then trying to find his way back to a pod that might even be buried by black dust by that time, or fly the pod closer to one of his targets. No contest. He lifted up high enough that he could glide a few yards above the surface, missing, he hoped, most of the rocks littering the ground. It wasted power but then the alternative would waste his energy, and once he'd found Felicity, he'd still have to get both of them back to the station. This made more sense in the long run.

Finally the pod got within half a mile of shuttle two's landing and takeoff coordinates. He slowed. One of the advantages of a craft as

small as the pod was maneuverability. He hovered a moment then landed right on the spot, touching the same soil no doubt where shuttle two had sat. Then he shut her down.

Outside, gale-force winds buffeted the pod and Bill used the dig-in landing gear to anchor the pod to the ground. The pointy feet would sink in maybe six feet, which, under normal conditions, would be sufficient. Then its tripod feet would open and grip the soil below surface level. But the dry, dead silt of Planet #666 was so lifeless, even six feet of it could blow away in a minute. Still, it was the best he could do.

He'd always figured exiting was the easiest function of this craft—just press the "unlock" button and lift the lid. But the minute the pod's hood opened everything, including Bill, was covered in black dust. He climbed out and closed the gullwing fast.

Outside, the air swirled like a tornado, of which there were plenty on Earth II, so he knew their dangers. He wouldn't have been surprised to find himself lifted into the air and deposited as a fleshy bag of broken bones miles from where he stood. He'd worn the space shoes with deep cleats in the soles, knowing what to expect, but they only penetrated four inches and were almost useless.

The heat sensor that Bill had given Felicity was not one of a kind but the prototype. He had made another, with a few improvements, and had brought it along. He held it now against his visor and scanned in every direction. Nothing. He didn't want to believe what this surely meant. If she was dead, how could he ever find her body and bring it home?

Darkness swirled, around his body, in his mind, his thoughts fearful, the wind surrounding him a maelstrom of evil, but what made him think that, he couldn't have said. When he looked up he could see the swirling beam of silver still rising from the planet's surface, pinpointing the spot where shuttle one had finally died. He had no idea what that silver beam was about, didn't want to know. Something, perhaps all his years of accumulated engineering knowledge, assured him that it couldn't be good and that staying away from it made the most sense. Anything that powerful and that consistent needed to be treated with respect.

Then a thought occurred to him. He might be able to find the heat scanner he'd given Felicity, if, that is, she still had it with her. The pod had an old-fashioned metal/plastic detector. He re-opened the hood and reached in, turning the power on just enough to use that detector and let it scan three hundred and sixty degrees from the pod out to a one-mile circumference.

Luck was with him. The beam found an object within seconds, not far from the landing site. He adjusted the coordinates in his hand-held compass and walked blindly through the wind for the twenty paces.

Regardless of how primitive or sophisticated the equipment, none of it was match for the conditions on Planet #666. He stood exactly where the scanner said the object lay and yet he could see nothing through the dusty gloom. There was nothing to do but get down on his hands and knees and search.

The old-fashioned method produced results and he soon had the scanner he'd given Felicity in his hand. It looked the worse for wear but the chip remained sealed inside, and the thing worked. Felicity... No, he had to face it... Felicity's body had to be close by.

He stayed at ground level, head bowed, which kept the wind and dust to a minimum, crawling on all fours carefully to avoid rupturing his suit on rocks, circling the spot where he'd discovered the heat sensor. When he had traveled outward a couple of dozen feet, he found her, or what remained.

The torso of the suit was deflated where it had been breached at chest level with a hole that looked as if a fist had punched through the material to get at her heart. Yes, that's exactly what it looked like; as if her heart had been torn out.

He shook his head hard to erase that grisly image from his mind.

Nothing remained of the middle of her body; all of it had been sucked out of the hole and evaporated on contact with the deadly gasses of this planet. Most of her had become part of the wind itself that swirled around him. The enclosed parts of the suit that shut off had preserved her limbs, her head and neck. Her body resembled images he'd seen of rag dolls, on the original Earth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He sat back on his heels. Yes, the suits

were a good design that worked well if a hand or leg was affected. But nothing could make a difference when the source of human life—the heart—was gone.

Bill leaned close to her visor and wiped it clean over and over, cupping his hands to protect it from dust accumulation before he could actually see through it. He focused the little light in his helmet to scan her face. The minute he could make out her features he pulled back sharply, and gasped in horror. Then, slowly, he moved in again, wiping her visor. Oddly, Felicity was smiling, her lips parted, her eyes wide open, dull and dead now, but staring as if she were seeing something, someone she loved. The grin should have been a rictus, but instead it was almost beatific, and it came to Bill's mind, though he was not so fanciful in his imagination as his sister, that she was envisioning Stanislav at the moment of her death, perhaps meeting his soul with hers; she had always assured Bill that no matter which of them died first, they would meet again in the next life. "Soul mates always do," he remembered her saying.

The winds had become more ferocious, and even crouching, Bill was almost knocked over. He knew that conditions here could alter—for the worse—in seconds. He picked up his sister's body and, checking the homing device on his sleeve, made his way slowly and carefully back to the pod.

He arrived at the vessel not a minute too soon. The second they boarded the unstable pod, it was yanked from the ground by the tip of a tornado and tossed several hundred feet through the air, landing with another thud, and Bill knew the pod was damaged, but wondered how much. He hoped it would fly them back.

Bill knew he couldn't remain here much longer, but he needed to catch his breath. He put Felicity's body down, bending it in half so it would fit into the cramped space beside him.

Now that he had paused, he could feel the impact of his sister's death. Inside his helmet, tears slid down his cheeks and sobs that were heard by no one on this desolate world, no one in the universe racked his body. They had been born seconds apart. She was his "big sister," beating him by three seconds. They had always been a unit, spending their childhood playing together, having the same friends,

going to the same schools, undertaking the same careers... Sticking up for one another. Only in romance did they go their separate ways. Felicity was more a free spirit, at least on the surface. Underneath he knew she desired a companion, children, a specific type of intimacy. Bill, who had been married briefly, was the opposite. He seemed the more conventional of the two but really he just wanted his freedom. He knew that Stanislav had meant a great deal to his sister, more than she could have told him in words, but he had always been able to read her as well as he could read himself. He'd never seen her sink into a depression before when a relationship ended. But then he'd never known any of her relationships to terminate because of the death of her lover.

He wiped the visor clean and looked down at her face close to his. Amazingly, she did not appear to be in distress. Death, it seemed, had not been unwelcome. And then he saw around her neck a chain that held Stanislav's ring—she had showed it to him.

"What do you want, sis?" he asked, knowing in his heart that she wanted to remain there, where Stanislav had died. She wanted to remain with him and be "buried" together under the constantly shifting soil of Planet #666. Despite what he wanted, Bill knew he could not take her from here, no matter how much he longed to give her a proper memorial service and send her remains out into space, as they'd always discussed. But that was in the past, and things change. They'd always known what the other wanted and needed, they were that close. He had to respect what he knew would have been her final wish.

He lifted the light body into his arms and touched his visor to hers. "I love you, sis. I just hope you're in a better place."

Bill took her com button from her suit, and checked her pockets, finding the small black box. It had to be from shuttle one. "God, how did you find this?" he wondered. He slipped it into his own pocket, opened the hood of the pod and pulled the two of them outside, fighting the fierce storm. He had only moments, and burial would be impossible. He'd have to dig twenty feet and even then he had no real faith that her body would remain underground for long. Instead, he

simply laid her on the soil and as he did so, the dust burst up and around her, covering her like a shroud.

He knelt by her side, not able to offer up a prayer to any deity because he had no belief system that would support that. Instead, he touched the tip of his gloved fingers to his visor and puckered his lips to kiss them, then touched his fingertips to her visor. "I hope we meet again," he said, and somehow, something like her voice swirled through him, assuring him, "Soul mates always do."

He had it, in his hands. He had the secret of engineering the evolution of the human race. He could control fate, his own, and the fate of an entire species.

Bardox checked with the computer. "Time until life support on the station reverts to normal?"

"Thirty-six minutes."

"Perfect," he said. He toyed with the notion of keeping the oxygen low for longer. That surely wouldn't harm the healthier members of the crew. But he did not want to seriously damage those he would need to carry out the tasks a station the size of G7 required, otherwise he would be forced to deal with that mundane work himself, which would not do. And even when the crew awoke, they would not know he had altered the air. Or at least they could not prove it.

No, the plan must be followed as envisioned. That had been the failing of scientists in the past, improvising as they went along instead of having enough belief in their hypotheses to follow their own rules.

Bardox donned the oxygen unit that would ensure he breathed the correct combination of gasses to keep him coherent, as he moved through the depleted station. He picked up the sample and cradled it in his good arm as carefully as a father holding a newborn.

"Whereabouts of every crew member?" he asked, using the universal code to exit his lab.

"By rank or by alphabetically organized names?"

"Oh, by alphabet. First names first," he said, amusing himself with a little task for the computer.

As he walked along the quiet corridor, the computer rattled off the names and places: "Akako, deck number one, bridge; Bella Morte, deck number three, hospital; Claude, deck number two, elevator corridor; Helmet, shuttle bay; London, deck number one, bridge; Renata, shuttle bay." The computer stopped.

"And the others? List all crew members, minus those you have mentioned."

"Andre, unknown; Bill, unknown; Brandi, unknown; Emery, unknown; Felicity, unknown."

Bardox stopped in his tracks. Felicity and Emery were, of course, dead. He'd seen that himself. Brandi, well, he imagined she'd succumbed to the oxygen depletion. Unfortunate, but unavoidable, he thought. But where were the other two? "Speculate on the whereabouts of Andre and Bill."

"Whereabouts unknown."

"Last known whereabouts."

"Andre, shuttle bay; Bill, cargo bay."

Bardox had no idea why they did not register with the computer's scanners. It was possible that Bill and Andre took shuttle two out of the station. They may have gone down to Planet #666 to search for Felicity and Emery, not believing Bardox. Bill, after all, was one of the two designated pilots. If they had taken it unauthorized, then likely that constituted the second emergency that Renata had called in. Or perhaps they'd had an accident with the shuttle.

Whatever had happened, Bardox lost interest in the possibilities quickly. He had climbed the stairs between his quarters on deck two up to deck one, walked the short hallway, and now used the universal code to open the door to the bridge.

"What have we here?" he said. "Sleeping beauties."

Akako's head lay on the control panel, her nose touching the question mark key on the keypad, sending an infinite stream of question marks across a monitor.

London sat in a high-backed chair, her head against the headrest, and her hands in her lap. He made his way toward her.

"My lovely, you are about to undergo a change. One that will alter your species in the future."

He set the case onto the workstation near her, and while he carefully opened it and removed the tissue, he thought about why he had chosen London.

Of every possible subject on the station, London was the one who had been far and away the prime candidate for his experiment. Her history, which he'd read extensively, portrayed her as an extraordinary girl from a rather average family. Her IQ rivaled Bardox's own, although he was loath to admit it. Both of them were in the top three percent. Over and over again he had watched her experiments in the cloning lab and she seemed to possess something beyond intellect, almost an uncanny intuition as to the intricacies surrounding the cloning of alien plants. While he was methodical and rigid in his approach, preferring to follow the rules and force them to work, London managed, to his horror, to break them on a regular basis. And yet the proof of the pudding was, as they once said, in the eating. He surely did not always condone her methods; still, she got results, which he could not argue with. And anyone who did try to argue with her, she managed to have a way of presenting her case in a manner which did not provoke the opponent, something Bardox had never mastered. He could not say that he admired her—that would be overstating things. Still, short of finding a subject that was a clone of him, London was the best possible person for his experiment. He envisioned glorious results. And in the end—not now, certainly, but down the road—she would thank him for his gift.

He had preloaded the tissue into the proper instrument and now had to remove some of London's clothing in order to administer it. Her body was lean, trim, and yet had voluptuousness given her frame that spoke of the ancient Greek concept of the perfect female form. He touched the flesh of her neck. Smooth and firm from her shoulder down her chest to a swelling breast, the nipple taut at his fingertip. Further down her flat stomach—he let his finger play in her bellybutton for a moment—then further down to the mons veneris that spoke of mysteries that Bardox had not contemplated since

boyhood. He remembered when his oh-so-strict father had found him gazing at visuals of nude women instead of finishing his science project. He had been made to stand naked in the corner of his room with a smarting bottom for two full hours and finish the science project in his head. That certainly had cured him of diversions.

Bardox brought himself under control. "Time to life support normalization?" he asked the computer, his voice deep.

"Nineteen minutes, seventeen seconds."

There was no time. Not for anything more. His demanding father, whom he had surpassed in both knowledge and fame, would be proud of his self-control. And jealous of the success that he would eventually achieve.

He injected the tissue into London's body, administered with an instrument of his creation that did not need to pierce the skin but, like a laser, was able to bypass skin and muscle and bone to zero in on the exact organ it sought and imbed the tissue precisely where he wanted it.

"Mission accomplished," he dressed his subject, but for one last clasp at the throat. He could not restrain himself from playing a little trick on her. Would she notice that this was undone when she awoke, and had been hooked before? He smiled to himself as he packed up his instrument and the now-empty tissue case.

Bardox used the universal code to unlock the elevator and take it down from deck one to deck three. If he positioned himself in the hospital, when Bella Morte woke—and presumably Brandi did not—he might convince her that he had been there all along. Life support had malfunctioned, she had fallen and hit her head, and so on. It would put him out of the line of questioning, at least temporarily. And since Renata had other problems to deal with, which likely involved the disappearance of Bill and Andre, he might escape an annoying and time-consuming interrogation altogether.

He turned down the corridor to the hospital and stopped short. Ahead, the heavy metal door, designed to contain whatever existed within had been torn open from the outside—he could see that the metal had been somehow cut and pulled out to fit a large body. Large enough that only one name came to mind: Jason X.

Bardox backed quietly up the corridor the way he had come, not wanting to alert the monster to his presence if he were still in the hospital. As he moved, he looked around him in every direction—the way seemed clear. He hurried down the corridor and re-entered the elevator, back up to deck two and his private lab. As he approached the entrance to his lab, he quickly punched in the universal code and entered, double locking the door behind him.

"Is there anyone aboard the station that is not a member of the crew?" he whispered to the computer right away, his voice trembling.

"Affirmative."

"Identity of that person."

"Unknown."

"How do you know that unknown presence is a human being?"

"DNA detected."

"Specify."

The computer went on to rattle off the particulars of the DNA until Bardox said, "Enough." Then, "Compare DNA of unknown human being on the station to the DNA retrieved from Planet #666 which I used to grow tissue today."

"Identical."

"Good lord."

Jason X had, somehow, gotten onto the station. How could that be? He had not been in the shuttle with Bardox. Or had he? Could he have clung to the vessel as it left the planet and returned to the station? No, that was silly, impossible. Nothing could survive deep space unprotected. Another possibility involved the missing Bill and Andre. But Jason X had been on Planet #666 when Bardox left. There had not been enough time between Bardox's return and when Renata announced both her emergency signals for the shuttle to depart G7 again, return to the planet, find Jason, and bring him back to the station. No, the only logical answer was that Jason had been on that shuttle with Bardox, somewhere, and it was Bardox who had unwittingly brought him here. And now he was no doubt prowling the corridors, leaving destruction in his wake. Meanwhile the entire crew of the station was not only unaware of his presence, but unable to protect themselves.

This would not do. He could not allow Jason X to exist on the station unrestrained. He must begin a further analysis of the data he had collected on the tissue sample he'd grown—the computer would have all the specifications. That would allow him to ascertain which drugs they had aboard the station that could be effective in controlling Jason X. Then the protocol could begin to administer that drug, perhaps via the air, although that was problematic. But the monster could not be reasoned with, that was clear, at least not until he was subdued, at which point Bardox himself would undertake a dialogue.

"Time until life support returns to normal?"

"Six minutes, twenty-three seconds."

Not much time. But before he began the process of analysis, he had a more pressing question: "Whereabouts of unidentified human being aboard the station?"

"That information is only available from the bridge."

Bardox rushed to his lab table. Time really was of the essence! For all he knew, Jason Voorhees could be just down the hall.

ELEVEN

Helmet rolled over onto his back, his brain full of cheese balls. Nearby, he heard a small groan and lifted his head just enough to watch Renata pulling herself to a seated position. He did the same—if she was coming around, so was he! But his head swam and he felt like he might be sick.

"Okay," she said, rubbing the back of her neck and then the top of her bald head, a baldness which he imitated, "tell me the oxygen didn't go down again."

Helmet found his throat dry, so he had a bit of trouble speaking, and his voice came out a little weaker than he would have liked. "Looks that way."

Renata was on her feet as he pulled himself up, although he would have preferred to get a grip before moving anymore, but he refused to look bad in front of her. Whatever she could do, he could do it better! At least that was his goal.

"Everything here looks the same. You see any changes?" she asked.

He glanced around the shuttle bay: the damaged shuttle two, the damaged glass room, the damaged Andre. "Nope, just like before."

They ran down the corridor, with her in the lead, but he reached around her and punched the elevator button.

"Universal lockdown in place," the computer said. "This elevator will not function."

"Renata Henderson, head of security, overriding universal lock down, personal code three, seven, five, four, two, one, H."

The door to the elevator opened immediately and they entered as Renata said, "All crew on the station, report in immediately."

Akako said in a dazed voice. "I'm here, I think. I mean, on the bridge. London's next to me, she's just waking up."

"Claude Bardox, reporting in as requested."

"Where are you, Bardox?" Renata's tone was unkind.

"I was in my quarters resting. Now I'm returning to the hospital. Apparently I needed rest. I seem to have passed out the moment my head touched my pillow."

"Who gave you permission to leave the hospital?"

"Why, Bella Morte, dear Bella. She felt I required rest and the optimal place for that would be in my own little bed."

"Bella Morte, report in."

No response.

"Bella Morte."

They exited the elevator at the top, on deck four. "Helmet, you head to the hospital and tell me what's what there. I'll be on the bridge."

As she raced down the corridor to the main elevator, Renata called over the com system, "All other station crew, report. Bill? Brandi? Damn."

So that Renata could get to the bridge quickly, Helmet took the stairs from deck four up to deck three, three steps at a time, trying to get his blood moving so that his brain would revive because it felt like the fluff of those damned caparazi plants on Earth II's smallest moon were stuffed in there.

By the time he reached the hospital on deck three he was winded. Had to have been the prolonged low levels of oxygen in his lungs, because he knew he was fit. Still, he'd have to get on the health equipment first chance he got and bounce his system back up to where it should be.

He'd been so busy thinking about his body, and how it wasn't the perfect machine he desired, that he didn't see the hospital door until he was halfway down the corridor. He stopped and pulled out both of his weapons.

What the fuck could have done that? He moved slowly down the corridor, looking behind him as well as in front. When he got to the damaged door, he peered inside. Right off, he saw Bella Morte on the floor, still out cold. Adrenaline kicked in. Stealthy as a cat, he eased through the opening and edged along the periphery, the wall to his back, laser weapons steady in his grasp, the safety off both.

A reconnaissance of the room, yanking open cupboards and closets as he came upon them, showed him that the triage was empty. There were two patients' rooms to check, and he began with the unoccupied one. When it was secure, he moved stealthily through the main area

and into the second patient's room where he found Brandi lying on her back, eyes wide open, mouth gaping, lips and face pale, a deep cut running the length of her body from throat to groin, almost severing her in two. That rattled him. He spun in a circle, looking all around him, afraid that whoever did this would jump on his back.

He checked the one closet, even the little storage space in the night table, which had fallen over, just to be sure, because he still didn't know what the fuck he was dealing with.

Eyes on the hospital's door, he hit his com button and said in a low voice, "Helmet reporting in from the hospital. Doctor Williams is dead. Murdered, it looks like. Bella Morte's still unconscious. I don't know why. This place has been invaded."

"Check out Bella Morte and if she's moveable, get her up here to the bridge with you ASAP. I want everyone on the station here on the bridge in five minutes. That's an order. And Bardox, that means you too."

"Understood," Helmet said.

Bardox answered casually, "If you feel it's necessary, Renata. I do hope Bella is alright."

Helmet, expecting anything to come at him from anywhere, scuttled back into the main room. He crouched down and placed the tips of two fingers on Bella's neck, searching for a pulse. But all the while his eyes scanned every corner of the room. She had a pulse and it didn't sound too weak. He slapped her cheek gently, then harder. "Bella Morte. Bella, wake up. Come on girl."

She began to moan, coming around, and he slapped her even harder, forcing her to open her eyes, squinting at the light. "What... happened? Where am I?"

"Come on, sit up," he ordered, helping her to a seated position.

"Oh, oh, oh..." she cried, holding her head with both hands.

"Are you dizzy?"

"No. Yes. The pain, Oh my God my head hurts. It's like I was slugged."

Helmet investigated her skull with his fingertips and finally reached a definite bump. When he touched it, she yelled, "Ouch."

"Yeah, you were slugged, but you're alright, it's just a bump. We gotta get out of here. Come on, up onto your feet."

He didn't wait for her to struggle to her feet, but hauled her up with one hand while she leaned against him for support. His other hand still gripped a laser gun.

"We gotta get to the bridge," he said. "Let's go."

"Alright, just give me a minute..."

"We don't have a minute. We go now."

He started to pull her along when she resisted. "Wait. What about Brandi?"

"Brandi's dead."

Bella Morte gasped and backed up enough that she could see into the patient's room where Brandi lay severed in two, connected only by her neck and head.

"Oh, God, what happened?"

"Bella, shut up. We're in danger here. We've got to go, right now."

He grabbed her upper arm and pulled her out the hole in the door, which she stared at in disbelief as they passed through it. The bridge deck was two levels up, and he preferred the stairs because they were right there, but he wasn't sure she could make it. He headed for the stairs anyway, intending to carry her if need be.

As they climbed up and up, they had just reached deck two when Helmet heard a noise below. He peered over the railing. He didn't see much, just a shoulder and an arm between deck three and deck four, big as an isometric machine; a muscle man. The thought occurred to him to take this guy out. Whoever it was didn't belong on the station, and the son of a bitch was headed up. He could just wait him out and—

Bella Morte moaned again.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered in her ear. He looked over the railing again and didn't see the guy. He felt he should go down there and take the bastard prisoner, but maybe the guy had a weapon. The combo of firepower and muscle power put Helmet off; if he was going after this prick, it would be with backup.

He picked Bella Morte up as if she were a child and slung her over his shoulder, then took the remaining stairs four at a time to deck

one. He raced them both down the corridor to the bridge and met Bardox just getting off the elevator.

"Hurry," Helmet said.

Bardox's eyes widened, as if he understood there was danger. They ran to the bridge door and pressed the button, knowing that the occupants could see who was waiting to enter. The door swooshed open and the three moved into the room immediately and the door slammed shut behind them.

Helmet deposited Bella Morte into a chair and London ran to her. "Are you alright, sweetie?"

"Headache from hell," she said, "but I think I'm okay. No broken bones or anything, I don't think. I don't know what happened. I can't even remember. I was talking with Bardox and the next thing I know, Helmet is trying to get me to sit up."

While they were talking, Renata, her voice filled with latent violence, said, "So fill us in, Bardox."

"I really don't know what to say. Bella agreed to let me return to my quarters, I left her standing in the triage. That's all I know."

"Did you give him permission to leave the hospital?" she asked, turning to Bella Morte.

"I... I don't remember."

"Listen," Helmet interrupted loudly, "can it, okay? We've got bigger problems. I saw an intruder."

Everyone stopped talking, stopped what they were doing completely, and turned to face him. Now that he was the center of attention, he could take his time, infuse this with the drama it deserved. "We were coming up the stairs. He was between decks three and four, making his way up. I don't think he saw us."

"Who is he?" Renata asked.

"No idea. I just saw his shoulder and arm."

"Did you confront him?"

"Hell, no. We were already at Deck two and I was trying to get this girl up here to safety."

"Your job as security is to deal with situations that arise and—"

"Don't fucking tell me what my job is."

"Then start doing it."

"Listen," London said, "this isn't the time to turn against each other. We've got to figure out where the others are and get them here as well, to safety."

"There are no others," Renata told her.

London gave her head a quick shake. "Of course there are. There's Andre. And Bill. And Brandi."

"Brandi's dead," Helmet said.

"She had a heart condition," London began.

"Somebody sliced her in half from the neck down."

"What?" Renata said. "She was cut? By who? This intruder?"

"That's my guess."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me this right away?"

London interrupted what was about to explode between the two security personnel. "What about the others?" her voice rang with tension and fear.

Akako said, "I just did a visual scan of the entire station. No images, so the guy must know where our cameras are located. I got a heat scan, though. Besides us on the bridge, there is one male Homo sapien running around, identity unknown."

"It could be Bill," Bella Morte said, her eyes still dazed. London had given her a dose of painkiller from the Bridge's medicine cabinet, and she felt a bit more coherent.

Helmet said, "We think Bill took off."

"What do you mean, 'Took off?'" Took off where?" Akako snapped. "You can't just take off from a space station."

"I mean, left the station. Vamoosed. Vacated the premises. Left the building—"

"That's crazy."

"Yeah, well if you check the computer logs you'll see the cargo bay opened and closed. Bill had that stupid pod in there. We figure he went looking for Felicity."

"Wait, wait, just wait," London yelled, closing her eyes, holding her hands in front of her as if to stop an attack. "Maybe it's Andre on the station."

Renata spoke in a tone that clearly hid something, perhaps the details. "It's not Andre."

London had been crouched beside Bella Morte but now rose to her feet. "How can you be so sure?"

"He's dead. In the shuttle bay, before we all passed out."

London's voice flatlined. Suddenly she felt as if she were under anesthetic. "How?"

"You don't wanna know," Helmet said.

"Yes I do."

"Something... Someone," Renata began again, "killed him."

"How?"

"Messily."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, I think we have a huge problem on this station right now, there's an intruder, and the details aren't that important so—"

"Everyone here has a right to know what we're facing," London said. "If Andre was killed by this intruder, the details are crucial."

"Totally agree," Akako said.

"Me too. Knowledge is power," Bella Morte added in a voice that was still weak, but a bit stronger than before.

"The guy picked Andre up and threw him against the glass room. The wall broke. So did Andre, Helmet said, as if he were describing an unmanned satellite crash and not the death of someone he knew.

London began to keel sideways towards Bella. Renata grabbed her before she fell, and Bella propped her up from underneath as best she could from her seated position.

"I'm alright. I'm alright."

"Take it easy," Renata said, helping London into a chair. Her voice had softened a bit, until she glanced at Bardox.

"Okay, walk us through this, Professor Bardox. You know a hell of a lot more about what's going on than you're saying. Who did you find on Planet #666, and bring back with you? And why is he trying to kill us?"

Suddenly they all heard a loud *BOOM*, and the station rocked, as if a meteor had struck it.

"I've got him," Akako yelled.

Everyone rushed to the screen in time to see a face fill the monitor. "Fuck," Helmet said, "the guy's wearing a mask like the old hockey

masks from the original Earth!"

"A metallic one," Akako said.

The face glared at the camera as if staring into the eyes of each of them, his blue orbs filled with chilling hatred.

"God, that's scary!" exclaimed Akako, who feared nothing.

"Uh huh," Helmet agreed.

"Who the fuck is that on my station?" Renata snarled.

"It looks like," Bella Morte said, staggering to her feet, "Jason."

Renata whirled and snapped at the girl, "Use your fucking brains! Jason is a legend. This guy is real."

"I hesitate to put a crimp in your style," Bardox said smoothly, "but I must partially agree with Miss Morte here. That is Jason. Well, actually it's Jason X, the one, and presumably, the only. Jason survived the original Earth."

Renata turned on Bardox, grabbing him by the front of his shirt, running him across the room until she had him pinned to the wall, his feet off the ground, her rage so intense she could not speak. She could only see him as a subhuman who thought he was so much better than everyone else, who had probably been responsible for the deaths of several station members, and had now, by virtue of what he'd brought aboard, endangered the rest of them.

Finally she heard the others yelling at her, felt them pulling on her arms, and that caused her to loosen her grip on the fabric that was twisted in her fist, choking Bardox, who gagged. Suddenly she released him and he plummeted to the floor.

She towered over the sniveling professor while he struggled for breath. "You better tell me what you know about this guy, and fast."

Bardox pushed himself up until he was seated, his back to the wall, and his hand at his throat, rubbing, as if to soothe a wound. In a ragged voice he said, "I... I didn't bring him aboard. Not intentionally. I swear it."

"But you knew he was there, on 666," Renata said.

"Yes. I knew. He destroyed Emery, and then Felicity, and he tore off my arm." He looked up at them with more vulnerability than anyone on G7 had ever seen on his face before. "But I didn't bring him aboard. I don't know how he got here."

"Duh, he came on your shuttle?" Akako said.

"Perhaps, but I don't know how."

"I think he came in the cargo hold," Helmet said from the control panel. He had moved to the real-time monitor and brought up the shuttle bay and pressed a button to get different camera angles of the room.

"Is that...?" London said, but Akako knocked Helmet's hand aside and jabbed at the button for the next angle before London could manage a good view of Andre's remains.

Helmet took over the button again and stopped the camera with a view of the back of the shuttle. "Look at this!" Everyone crowded around but Bardox. The monitor clearly showed the cargo hold door at the back of the shuttle lying on the floor as if it had been either pried off completely, or pushed out from within.

"He must have come that way," Akako said. "Somehow the guy survived in there."

"Not hard," Renata said. "The controls were probably set to the same environmental conditions as on the shuttle, so he'd have life support."

"But I don't understand." Bella Morte held her head as if to keep her brains inside. "How can this guy be Jason, err, Jason X? He's supposed to be dead. They shot him into space and—"

"And *Black Star 13* found him, and he destroyed the crew," Helmet said.

London added what they all now realized, "And the crew of *The Revival*."

"And now," Bella Morte said, "he's going to destroy every one of us."

"Don't be ridiculous," Renata snapped. "We know he's here, we have the advantage."

"You can't destroy him, his body self-repairs," Bardox said as he clambered to his feet with difficulty and no help from anyone else.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Renata snapped.

"Jason X has been implanted with nanotechnology that is light years ahead of what we possess. They're called nano ants, developed by the military, and they repair his body as it's injured. That's how he

survived on that planet, and on the shuttle. The ants actually keep him from dying. He is a superman. An indestructible machine in fleshy form."

"That's impossible," Akako said.

"It's crazy," Bella Morte added.

"It's true," Bardox assured them. "And unless we can find a way to control him, we are doomed."

"Shut the fuck up!" Renata screamed. "We're taking the son of a bitch out."

"Yeah, fuck him," Helmet roared.

Suddenly they all heard a loud thud, then another, as if someone, or something, was trying to systematically break through the door to the bridge.

"Look," Akako said, bringing up a picture of the outside of the bridge door. Jason X bashed his body into it and beat it with both fists like a deathly drummer. Everyone could clearly see that the bridge door had sustained dents, deepening with every pounding.

"Universal lockdown," Renata ordered the computer. "He can't get through impenetrable steel mixed with hyper metals," She said with more certainty in her voice than she felt. Someone had to be in control here, had to take the position that they could deal with this guy.

"You didn't see the hospital door. We gotta get out of here." Bella Morte screamed, jumping to her feet.

"I'm with you," Akako said, on her feet too, both girls headed towards the emergency exit and the stairwell that never locked, with Bardox close behind.

"Come on," London said, grabbing Renata's arm, trying to pull her away, but the head of security shook her off. "Let's get to safety and try to get a sense of what we're dealing with."

But Renata stood firm, her weapons out, aimed at the door.

"Maybe I should go with the others to protect them," Helmet said. He did not want to be here confronting Jason X, just him and Renata and some puny laser weapons. From everything he knew about Jason, and now Jason X, that didn't sound like an even match. And if the truth were known, he wanted odds more in his favor than even.

Renata said nothing, just stood stonily glaring at the door. What should he do? She wasn't giving him any direction. But within seconds there was nothing more to say. Helmet watched the bridge door sliced through as if it were a block of cheese. Half a foot of the large knife that he knew was probably the machete from Bella Morte's stories came through the metal. The blade seemed more honed than anything Helmet had ever seen before, and the guy must have the strength of ten men to cut through a door that thick.

He glanced at Renata, who stood as if made of stone. She was a fool. Hell, he should have got out of there, to save himself. Somebody would have to be in charge if Jason X killed her.

Helmet backed towards the emergency exit surreptitiously, but Renata didn't even notice. But suddenly he stopped, finding himself transfixed as a hulking figure broke through the opening like a demon from hell being born.

Jason X paused for only a short moment, taking in the scene. Instead of rushing Renata, he headed straight for Helmet. "What the fuck!" Helmet cried. Before Helmet could react, Jason X picked him up by his waist in those huge hands and hurled him into the control panel. His back hit the board hard and pain instantly shot through him.

Instantly, Renata came to life. She fired her laser into Jason X's back, the beam hissing as it went through metal to flesh, stunning Jason X for a split second and no more.

Helmet saw Renata's expression mirror his own. They were both shocked. Jason X was not only still standing, but he seemed to recover almost instantly.

Renata fired again, and this time Voorhees turned her way.

Helmet pushed himself away from the control panel as Jason reached Renata. Renata fired again and even as the laser beam struck, Jason was slicing her with that damned machete. He cut off the hand holding the laser and it and the gun clunked as they hit floor. Her finger still pressed the button, and the laser beam wove around the room stopping inches from Helmet.

He watched Jason X slice off Renata's other hand, which had been reaching for her backup weapon, chopping it at the elbow. Blood

gushed everywhere, spurting against the walls, against Jason X, against Helmet. Without hands she was helpless. Her face showed that. Everybody knew that.

"Helmet, shoot the bastard!"

But Helmet just stood there, mentally and physically paralyzed, and when he was finally able to act he inched his way along the control panel towards the emergency exit.

Jason X let him go, and Helmet didn't know why, but he didn't care. Maybe the killer was just preoccupied with maiming Renata. Fearless still, she kicked at his groin, and it was as if she just tapped him—he didn't even fall back, or double over, and Helmet figured that Jason Voorhees really was invincible.

Jason X used his sharp blade to slice and dice Renata. When he started on her legs she dropped to the floor instantly, screaming out in pain. Still, he did not break her, and Renata glared at the intergalactic serial killer and snarled, "Fuck you, Jason."

Jason Voorhees responded by using the blade like a spear, ramming the cold steel up inside her mutilated and bloody genitalia, ripping and tearing repeatedly as if in some primal, sexual act.

Helmet saw her face streaked with pain at this awful parody of penetration. He'd often thought of what it would be like to have sex with Renata, rough sex, and now he knew: she would not like it, not at all.

Her head turned and her eyes locked onto Helmet's as he backed through the emergency room door. "Wimp," she screamed. "Fucking betraying wimp!"

The tip of the blade that had entered her now pierced the skin of her stomach as it exited, ripping its way out, carving open her stomach and her uterus, exposing everything inside her as blood spilled out, covering the arm of her murderer, the floor, everything around her in the brilliant red that meant life was seeping out of her.

Renata's eyes rolled up into her head. Her words should have hurt Helmet. Her death should have left him angry, or at least frightened. But Helmet had turned and, heart pounding, raced through the emergency exit tunnel, leaving the catastrophe behind him.

Her words didn't faze him. Nothing fazed him now. He just wanted to reach the far end of the tunnel, get through the emergency stairwell door and hit the lock on that door. He did, and did not stop for a moment to worry about what the others would think, what they would say, that he survived and Renata did not. He only wanted to find them, fast. He heard them below, rushing down the emergency stairs. He had to catch up to them. There was safety in numbers. Renata had always said that. If there was any safety when it came to Jason Voorhees.

TWELVE

Bill stared blankly at the innards of the black box from shuttle one. He'd opened it before he departed Planet #666 and the chips seemed undamaged. Ever since the catastrophe on Planet #302, black boxes had been built to withstand incredible force, pretty well anything but a star imploding. Of course, if a star imploded, one would be hard-pressed to find the black box anyway, or anything else for that matter! But that wasn't the case here—Bill had it in his hands.

The box contained a self-play mechanism. Both that and the recording chip were completely functional, and had avoided the ferocious dust of Planet #666. He'd already played the data twice, taking a break to digest what he had heard.

Every sound of the horror of Emery's death, the egomaniac details of Bardox's ridiculous plan, and the attack by someone named Jason X... could there really be a Jason X? He'd always believed he was just a character in the stories that Bella Morte entertained them with. It all came through loud and clear.

This entire fiasco was avoidable. Everything. The deaths, the destruction of shuttle one... He felt himself vibrating with rage. Bardox had been responsible for all of it, his megalomania, and his conceit. And while he had no proof, Bill was fairly certain that Felicity's death at what were likely to be the hands of Jason X could be traced directly to Bardox. From everything Bill had heard about how Bardox had kicked Emery out of the shuttle, forcing him into the path of the killer, Bill was convinced that Bardox had also left his sister to the mercy of Jason X. Had left her to die alone on Planet #666.

The second he returned to G7 he planned on snagging the black box from shuttle two. He knew it would be horrifying, listening to the exchange between Bardox and Felicity, and probably listening to her death agonies, but he had to be certain. And once he was, Bardox would pay.

The pod had just cleared the outer atmosphere of the planet. It would be another hour before he reached the station, because the

pod traveled at a third the speed of a shuttle. The pod's communication's program was so archaic that he could not contact the station even if he were inside it. Now he regretted not upgrading it. Conditions were not good when he left, and he didn't know what the problem was, but his gut reaction told him something was terribly wrong. And he knew he would be able to trace the roots of it to Bardox, who he'd find alone. Then there would be no one to stop the retribution

London had raced after Akako and Bardox to the latter's private lab, slower because she was helping Bella Morte along in her confused state. She doubted very much that any of them had a plan, just escape on the brain. It was all so unbelievable: Jason Voorhees on board this station. How incredible was that? And Andre dead. She didn't even have time to grieve the loss of her lover right now. Survival was top priority by a mile.

Bardox punched in some numbers on his door, somehow overriding the lockdown, but no one seemed to notice that now. Once inside the lab, he closed the door and pressed a button explaining, "This is a reinforcement barrier." It swelled and undulated like waves in an ocean then stabilized. London was amazed at this liquid force field within the interior of a room. One day, if they all survived, she would have to ask about it.

"Is that thing going to hold?" Akako demanded, panting to get her breath back.

"I imagine it will," Bardox said, seemingly relaxed and in control again despite being the most out of breath. When he turned, London noticed that the back of his head was caked with blood from when Renata bashed it against the bridge's wall.

"What are we going to do?" Bella Morte cried in a small voice, clearly frightened out of her mind.

London helped her onto a chair and put a protective arm around her. Bardox scowled in their direction—obviously this was his seat of power, but London had no respect for his possessions, very little

respect left for the man himself, and one look from her told him she would not allow Bella Morte to vacate the throne.

No one answered Bella Morte because no one had a solution. That was obvious. And all London could say was, "Hang on, sweetie. Just hang on."

While Akako paced and London sat with Bella, Bardox has been at his lab table, setting up an experiment. Suddenly Akako stopped and shouted at him, "What the fuck's wrong with you? Don't you understand that it was you who brought this... this creature onboard? And that he's going to kill us one by one, you too?"

Bardox ignored her, infuriating Akako, who raced to the lab table and knocked several glass beakers to the floor.

Now Bardox looked at her, his face set with disdain. "Does it occur to you, Miss Tsunami, that there might be a more scientific way to dispatch Jason X? I'm sure it hasn't occurred to you, but it has to me."

Akako flipped her long dark hair behind her and crossed her arms over her chest. She stood with her legs firmly supporting her small frame like two posts anchored in the earth. "Look, if you have a solution to the problem you caused, you better give it to us now."

They heard a loud crash, a lot of banging and when Bardox pressed the button that activated the camera focused on the corridor and the door, the small group saw Helmet, looking frantic, pounding as if his life depended on it, which presumably it did.

"Let him in," London said. No one moved to open the door.

Akako, Bardox and even Bella Morte looked at her for a second too long.

London went to the panel where Bardox had initiated the force field waves and pressed the same button, which she imagined released it.

Bardox raced to her side, ready to depress the button again, but she cut him off with a look that said, you'd better think about it.

The professor stepped back. "Open the door," London commanded, in a voice she had used before but only on rare occasions; this was a situation that called for authority, if ever there

was one. Akako opened the lab door and Helmet almost fell into the room.

"Close it, quick," he said, pressing his hand over the button himself. Once he had stepped into the room panting, trembling slightly, sweat dripping from his forehead, London re-activated the force field.

"Aim the camera more on the corridor," Akako said, and Bardox, with a sigh, did so. "We need to get our weapons ready for when he comes."

"This is not the answer," he mumbled, as if to a child.

"Maybe not, but it will do until a better answer comes along. Where's Renata?" This Akako directed towards Helmet, who had collapsed in a chair looking pale.

He just shook his head.

"What's that mean?" Akako demanded. "She's injured?"

Helmet shook his head again.

"Dead?"

He nodded.

"What, you left her to fight by herself?"

Helmet looked up at her, the guilt written in his eyes, but his voice was strong and adamant and defensive yet the others could see through him easily. "Of course not! Jason X came after me, Renata jumped between us. I would have taken him out but she got in the way and I figured that somebody who can protect you should come with you guys."

"And that would be you?" Akako's voice rose to the occasion. "I'm not buying it!" She moved towards him, fists raised. "You left her alone with him, you fucking—"

"Hold it right there!" London shouted over her, her voice sounding suspiciously like Renata's.

Akako turned, her face livid, fists still raised. "And who the hell are you to give orders?"

"I'm the commander of this station now. Read the rules. You'll follow my orders and my order is to lower those fists and step back."

The two women had an eye-to-eye for several seconds until Akako turned her head sharply and said "Fuck it!" with an aside to Helmet,

"This isn't over, asshole!" but she did lower her hands as she turned her back to him.

"Well done," Bardox said. "I always knew you had leadership potential."

London did not take the compliment well. Right now, she had to keep a rein on her emotions, which were all over the map, not to mention the emotions of everybody else in the room. The last thing she needed was to be goaded by Bardox, or anyone. She had to make decisions, give orders, do something.

"Helmet, I don't give a damn about your ego, what was said and done that inflates or deflates you. What I want to know is what you saw. How did Jason X attack Renata? How did he kill her?"

Helmet looked down at his hands. "He's got this... this big knife—"

"The machete?" Bella Morte said in awe. "I thought that somebody made that up."

"It's real. The thing sliced through the bridge door just like it sliced through the hospital door. He moves at the speed of a star going supernova. Didn't know anybody could move that fast, the way he sliced and diced her." Helmet looked up at London and she actually felt sorry for him when he said, "I looked into his eyes."

"And? What did you see?"

"Death. Lonely-as-space death. He's a killing machine without an 'OFF' button."

"Not necessarily," Bardox said. "And you are incorrect Mr Schmidt. Jason X is mostly just a human being."

"He's no fucking human."

"Ah, but you are wrong. His anatomy has been supplemented with metal parts, it's true, but that is not the source of his strength and agility, and his remarkable regenerative abilities."

"And you know what is?" London asked.

"Of course. I've been studying him."

Akako walked right up to Bardox and stood inches from him. "Maybe you'd like to enlighten us, so we know what the fuck we're dealing with?"

"I intend to do just that, if you wouldn't mind giving me a little room to work."

"Yeah, and is this a good time to be working, when we're all about to be slaughtered?"

"It is when I tell you what I'm working on."

"Alright, you two," London snapped. "Akako, go meditate; everybody, just calm down. Bardox, what have you got to say about Jason X. How do we stop him?"

"First of all, you must get it through your heads that Jason X is human."

"Not like any human I've ever seen," Helmet said.

"True, he is a superbeing. But flesh and blood none the less. The miracle of Jason X—"

"I wouldn't call him a miracle," Akako interrupted.

"The miracle is that when Doctor Stein implanted into him the experimental prototype of our very own nanotechnology, what the good doctor called 'nano ants, he created a being so far in advance of anyone alive today that we deem him alien. Everyone in this room, well, perhaps not Mr Schmidt, but you ladies are familiar with basic nanotechnology. We've been using it to counteract specific conditions in the body since the twenty-second century, when scientists first cured a brain tumor with tiny surgical instruments that coursed through the bloodstream to the source of the tumor and snipped away at the arteries that fed it life through blood and—"

"Get to the point!" Akako screamed.

Bardox sighed. "The point is, Doctor Stein created a wildly superior technology that, when implanted, stays in the human body. It's a bit like have an internal surgical team on call all day every day."

London held up a hand. "Are you telling me that Jason X has these nano ants in his system all the time and that whatever wounds he suffers are healed quickly?"

"Not quickly, instantly. A cut is sutured even as it is occurring."

"Great," Helmet said, glancing at the monitor again, as he had been doing for the last few minutes.

"So the guy's well even before he's sick," Bella Morte said.

"Simply put, Miss Morte, and almost accurate." While he'd been speaking, Bardox had been placing a single remaining cell that he had saved from Jason X inside the sterile container into a tube, and

adding other components. He placed the tube in the spinner and rotated it at approximately a thousand miles per hour, which blended the contents in seconds.

"Okay, he's instantly repairable. That's a problem for us. What about if we cut off his head? Can these nano ants grow him another one?" Akako wanted to know.

"As if we could get close enough," Helmet said.

"Indeed, Mr Schmidt has a point." Bardox stopped the machine. He poured the pale pink contents into another vial, stoppered it, then placed the vial into another machine. When he closed the lid, some type of gas filled the interior, blocking the view of what was going on. He pressed a number of buttons. "Now we wait," he said, sitting on the stool behind the lab table.

"What are we waiting for?" Bella Morte was the first to wonder aloud.

"Why, the serum, of course."

"What serum?" London peered into the chamber and watched it go from opaque to transparent. The mixture in the vial had turned a glowing crimson.

Bardox opened the chamber and removed the vial, which contained about an eighth of an inch of liquid. He held it up to the group proudly, as if he had mixed the perfect cocktail. "The serum that will incapacitate Jason X."

Akako said, "And how will that happen, if these nano fucking ants repair his system instantly? Won't they eliminate anything that's foreign?"

"Yes they will, but not this serum. The reason is, the serum is made from the DNA of Jason X. I know it is his DNA because I extracted it."

"Alright, so the serum will invade his body and the nano ants will ignore it because it seems to belong there," London said. "And then?"

"And then the retro agents take over."

"Will you fucking spell it out?" Akako shouted, losing whatever slim control she normally managed with people who did not operate at her pace.

Bardox shook his head and lowered the vial. "So impatient. You were definitely not a candidate."

"For?"

"Evolution."

"What?" she screamed. "Are you fucking insane?"

London got between them again. "Tell us what you anticipate this serum will do once it's in Jason X's body."

Bardox smiled at her, as if she were a prize-winning student. "The DNA in this serum is like his and yet is not like his. It's broken into two layers, if you will. The outer layer, which the nano ants will encounter, is composed of Jason X's DNA."

"So they'll go stupid and leave it alone," Helmet said.

"Very good, Mr Schmidt."

Helmet looked pleased with himself for a moment, then remembered the danger and glanced at the monitor.

"Within that DNA," Bardox said, "is another layer which has been altered because it contains both Jason X's DNA as well as the codes for the nano ants. The outer layer will dissolve slowly, so slowly that the inner layer will infiltrate cells in his body without the nano ants noticing. If any do notice, the altered DNA will act as a signal to the ants, and turn them against other ants, perceiving them as a foreign body, because I've altered them."

"Okay," London said slowly. "This sounds complicated, but you're saying that the DNA is going to turn the ants against themselves, leaving Jason X without the ability to repair himself, and then the altered ants will do what?"

"They will now be re-programmed for one purpose and that is to temporarily shut down Jason X's anger receptors."

"So... this will let us capture him?"

"Essentially, yes."

"I say we kill him outright," Akako said.

"Lemme know when you figure out how to do that," Helmet snapped. "I saw the fucker in action."

Akako ignored him. "And how do we know this voodoo shit will work?" The skepticism in her voice dominated the room.

When Bardox didn't answer immediately, Helmet said it for him, "We don't."

"Wait a minute!" Bella Morte said, holding her head again. "Didn't you say 'temporarily'?"

"Miss Morte," Bardox spoke as if to a child, "I'm afraid that is as good as it will get for the moment. Once we have him under control, we should have the time to develop other more effective serums."

He gave them a few seconds to absorb this then said, "I believe I have the correct formula but we will have to test it to be certain."

"How do we do that?" Bella asked, the look on her face assuring them all that she knew the answer as well as they did.

"Why, we inject it into Jason X, of course."

"Yeah?" Helmet said, his eyes not leaving the screen. "And how the fuck do we do that?"

"With this sonar needle. It is best to have the needle's opening at the surface of the skin. Still, the contents can be injected from a distance of two yards and much of it should still enter his body through his pores. Hopefully enough to disarm him and carry out the task required."

"Are you saying we gotta get within six feet of this fucker?"

"Yes, Mr Schmidt, one of us must."

"Man, this is insane."

"No kidding." Akako, who normally did not agree with Helmet, figured at least he was smarter than Bardox.

London knew they had no other chance. If Jason X had the ability to regenerate tissue, and it looked like he did, and if he was even a fraction as maniacal as the legends said, as they had seen for themselves, then one of them would need to get close enough to him to inject the serum. It seemed their only hope. And nobody had a better idea. They couldn't hide forever. "I'll do it," she said.

Bardox instantly shouted, "No."

Everyone stared at him. Sensing that he'd overreacted, he said, "What I'm concerned about is that we need a leader, if you will. And we also need someone who has knowledge of cloning, in the event something happens to me, or to the serum. I can give you the parameters of the experiment and you can replicate it, if need be."

"Bella Morte can replicate it," London said.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Certainly a technician is not as qualified as a scientist. No offense, Miss Morte."

"None taken," Bella assured him, waving a hand to indicate how inconsequential hurt feelings would be given the circumstances.

"I merely mean, Miss Jefferson, that you hold both the credentials to replicate the experiment and as well as taking charge of the station. It seems that someone else should undertake this task. Perhaps someone more physically able to cope with Jason X." Bardox looked at Helmet, as did every other eye in the room.

"You want me to jam this into the guy's arm? Forget it. I'll mutiny."

"God, what a suck," Akako said. "Give me the damned needle, I'll do it."

"Let me," Bella Morte said. "You guys can set up a distraction and I can get behind him and—"

"Sorry, Bella, but you're not one hundred percent yet," London reminded her. "We need someone strong and quick. As much as I hate to say it, Akako, you're our best bet."

Akako simply nodded.

"Bella has a point, though. There are enough of us to create a distraction, and that should let Akako come up behind Jason X."

"But what if it doesn't work?" Helmet wanted to know. "What if he goes for her first? Or if the serum doesn't do what Professor Genius here thinks it will?"

"Then we're all dead anyway, stupid," Akako said.

"Alright, we have a plan, and that's better than no plan," London said.

"Right, and once we've got him immobilized, I say we cut his body into a million parts and—"

"No, absolutely not, Miss Tsunami!" Bardox said. "I did not create the serum to destroy him. We must keep him intact. He's an amazing specimen. Unique. There is none other like him in the universe. He's special."

"He's a killer," Akako reminded him. "He murdered everybody on *Black Star 13*, the entire crew of *The Revival*, and about one half of

the crew of this station so far who, by the way, were our friends. Me, if I get the chance, I take him out."

"Yeah," Helmet shouted.

"Absolutely," Bella Morte agreed.

London turned to Bardox. "Your specimen will have to be studied post mortem. My first priority is the safety of the remaining crew. Whatever happens, we need to not just immobilize Jason X—because first off, we don't know if this serum will take effect or not, and secondly, we don't know how long it will work—but we need to incapacitate him. Permanently. Now, show me how to replicate this serum and—"

"Shit," Helmet cried, jumping to his feet. "He's here."

The five stared at the monitor, watching Jason X stomping down the corridor towards the lab door.

"How much pressure can that force field handle?" London asked in a subdued voice.

"It should withstand the force of half a dozen men," Bardox assured her.

"It better," Akako said.

THIRTEEN

The heavy body of Jason X took a running leap and bashed into the lab door, sending shockwaves through the room, and likely the entire station. BAM! Another crash struck the reinforced metal door, which shuddered under the stress.

"Fuck, he's gonna knock the station out of orbit," Helmet yelled.

The five inside the lab had instantly jumped to their feet, well into their individual versions of severe anxiety attack. Bella Morte fidgeted and chewed the cuticles of her fingernails; with the other hand she pulled at her dark tresses, all the while making little mewling sounds. Akako felt rooted to the floor, fists clenched, teeth clamped, mind focused, a warrior prepared for battle, standing her ground. Helmet paced in a small circles, alternating watching the monitor and the door, chest heaving, sweat pouring down from his bald head to his gleaming forehead, laser gun already pulled and aimed at the impending intruder, a sense of defeat gripping him. London busied herself checking the panels to make sure the door's lock was as secure as it could be. Dismayed, she watched the flickering light that went from red for closed to green for open; in moments that door would be breached and they would be relying exclusively on Bardox's force field which she hoped to hell held.

Bardox calmly packed up his case of portable equipment and the tiny fragment of genetic material that remained of Jason X to be used in the event that more serum was required. "Miss Tsunami, I believe now is the time to take the solar needle in hand and prepare for the injection."

Akako strode to the lab desk and snatched from Bardox the needle that would prove to be their salvation, or damnation. She would give it her best shot, as she did everything. That's all anybody could do.

"Remember," he cautioned, "the closer the better, but no further than three feet."

"I'm not stupid," she snapped, resuming her stance on the same spot facing the door. "I'll get him."

"Where's the emergency exit door? I don't see it!" London asked Bardox.

"The lab is a room within a room, within my private quarters and —"

Before he could finish, the door to the lab crashed inward, flying into the force field that sputtered mightily at the high velocity contact. Helmet yelled, "Motherfucker!" and fired his laser, hitting the field, which caused it to sputter more and the beam to fracture and spray out into the room.

"Hold your fire!" London yelled.

Bella Morte screamed long and loud at the sight of Jason Voorhees, her worst nightmare, come to life. In a moment of lucidity she wondered if her obsession with his stories had somehow called him up out of fantasy and into real time. Why had she told those stories?

The giant stood before them, legs apart, arms dangling like the limbs of some enormous and dangerous gorilla, staring from one to the next as if trying to decide which chocolate to pick out of a box. He was dressed in some sort of armored outfit, a breastplate, arm plates that bulged with insanely developed muscles, shin and thigh guards, wearing steel-fingered gloves, reinforced metallic shoes, and that otherworldly metal face mask that seemed grow from his skin and rise up and over his head. All of it left Bella Morte shrieking when she gazed into the mask's eyeholes and locked onto those dead-blue orbs, so much a blend of human and alien, almost sparking with venom and murderous glee. She could not stop screaming.

"Shut up," Akako snapped at her. "He can't get in."

Bella clamped her hands over her mouth to stop her cries of terror, but they only muted the sound.

Helmet fired again, and once more the beam of the laser broke apart, filling the room with dangerous light, and the force field trembled.

"Stop!" London yelled as she rushed to him. "You're weakening the force field." She knocked the laser from his grip. It fell onto the floor and instantly stopped firing.

"How about saving the ammo for an emergency, you imbecile," Akako yelled in his direction.

Fury and fear vied for prominence in Helmet, and he spun in a circle looking for an exit. "Fuck, I'm outta here!" The door he yanked open led to a closet, and he slammed it shut so hard it fell to the floor.

Jason X took two steps into the force field, which crackled with life. Instantly the field shocked him, thrusting him back a foot. He plowed into it again, getting shocked again, the metal he wore and the flesh of his body smoking at the intense and violent contact. London pried her gaze from Jason X with difficulty and forced herself to study the monitor and the controls; the field was stressed, and she feared that it, too, would give way like the door. It was already cranked to max. There was nowhere to go with it.

While Jason X did this over and over, ramming the force field, every time he was pushed back London turned down the force field's power, then up as far as it would go again the moment Jason X headed towards it. She hoped this might extend the life of the field, but it didn't have long to live, that was certain—reading the numeric level of its power told her the field was crashing.

Helmet distracted her when he leaned over the lab counter, his head swiveling in all directions until he stopped and focused on Bardox, who he grabbed by the shirt collar. "Where the fuck's the emergency door?"

Suddenly, the force field began to sputter loudly. London cranked up the power yelling, "He's getting through."

Jason X's arm came into the room, magnetic and laser currents sputtering blue and white around it, the metal cobalt hot and the skin black and scorched, both steaming in the air, the scent of burnt meat and hot metal. Sparks flew everywhere, so many and so far that London feared they would ignite something they landed on and start a fire in the lab.

Suddenly Jason X withdrew his arm and she and else in the room watched in awe as the everyone exposed skin, which had just been burned to the third degree, was sloughed off like the skin of a snake as new, healthy dermis forced its way to the surface.

"Fuck!" Helmet yelled. "The Ants are repairing him!" He yanked Bardox halfway over the lab table screaming again in his shocked face, "How the fuck do I get out?"

London yelled amidst the confusion, "We stick to the plan. Akako, you're with me. Bella, Helmet and Bardox, over there." She pointed across the room at the wall, which would put them in the direct path of Jason X once he got through.

Akako came around behind the lab table. London left off with the controls to run around the lab counter and shove the seemingly paralyzed-with-fear Bella Morte towards the wall. The girl Stumbled as London moved her along, her body quivering in terror.

"Helmet. Damn you, let him go and both of you get the fuck over to that wall," London screamed as she headed back to the join Akako.

Jason X had gotten both arms and a leg through the force field, all of it sending black smoke into the air to obscure visibility and mix an olfactory affront that blended the nauseating scent of cells and metal destroyed by fire. Cells that healed instantly, if anyone in the room had had the time to watch, which they didn't. Static crackled through the chamber at an ear-piercing level, the force field alive with positive ions. The lab was moments from a full invasion.

London raced around the lab table to the other side and grabbed Helmet, dragging him with all her might towards the wall, but the security man was bigger, stronger and would not release his grip on Bardox while he continued to yell, "Where's the other exit?"

Bardox, infuriatingly, kept a stupid smile on his face that only egged Helmet on and refused to say where the emergency exit was, and there must be one, but then London realized in a flash there was not. That Bardox had designed a room within a room for extra security—only one door that acted as both entrance and exit. That's why the lab was smaller than a normal room. The only way out of this room was past Jason X.

"Universal unlock," she yelled to the computer, "London Jefferson, cloning specialist, code three seven, eight, four, nine, J." To Helmet she tried to say, "There isn't any—"

Suddenly Helmet punched Bardox in the face twice, short, rapid punches that she could see and hear broke Bardox's nose. The

scientist's head snapped back and blood spurted from his nose and mouth, covering his face, chest, and Helmet's fist still pulling on his shirt.

"Fuck you!" London screamed as she lifted a chair and smashed against Helmet's back three times, until he let Bardox go. The professor immediately fell onto the lab table counter and then slid back behind it onto the floor.

Helmet turned on London. He grabbed her by the arm and spun her in a full circle, sending her flying across the room and into the wall where Bella Morte cringed. London hit the wall with the top of her head. Her eyes went up and her lids down; her legs buckled and she fell to the floor like a rag doll, unconscious.

Jason X had all his limbs and his head through the force field, which crackled and sputtered around him as if it were electrified. Every part of his flesh that was protruding into the room was fully healed. In moments he would be all the way through the field, and the field would snap from the pressure. And Jason X would be more than whole.

"Gimme the damned needle," Helmet demanded as he raced around the lab desk to Akako, who screamed at him "Fuck you, loser idiot!" Her knee had to connect with his groin twice before Helmet bent over. Then she kicked him hard backwards. He tripped over Bardox and fell on his back.

Suddenly an ear-piercing crackle and a sonic-boom rode the air. And Jason X entered. Bella Morte screamed long and loud as Jason stomped his way towards her.

Suddenly the girl stopped screaming, and some kind of otherworldly calm overtook her. "Wait, wait," she told the monster determined to reach her. She clasped her hands and held them up before him in a supplicating manner. He stopped about a foot in front of her. She'd always been able to get through to everybody in her short life, always found a way. Surely she could with Jason X. He was, after all, human.

"Listen, I know who you are, and what they've done to you. I know your stories—your history. I'm not going to hurt you."

It sounded incongruous even to her, given that he was clearly the aggressor and she the intended victim.

But Bella Morte could do nothing else. She had no other weapons that she knew of, just her compassion. "Let me help you, we won't harm you, okay? Trust me." She stretched out one trembling hand like a mother, towards his face, as if to reach up and gently stroke that masked visage to soothe the terrible wounds that Jason X had endured.

"Fucker!" Helmet's voice came from behind. He had recovered enough to pick up the laser gun. He aimed it at Jason X's back.

Out of the corner of her eye, Bella Morte saw the blade of the machete swing back and forward, slicing her across the middle, cutting her in two. Somehow that sharp pain was instantly dulled by the shock that washed over her. "How could you hurt me?" she said, stunned. "I've told your stories. I've kept them alive. We could have been friends."

Before she could say or do more, the blade moved in quick, precise strokes, cutting away her flesh, peeling it back, leaving her arms and legs and torso skinned alive, fragments of muscle over bone as if a famished animal had been gnawing at her, her dermis covering only her hands, feet and head. How could he move so fast? she wondered absently through the pain. How could he move with such precision? How could he kill her?

But her questions were never voiced, never answered. She watched him turn away quickly, and that was the last thing Bella saw in this life, rejection by the mythology that she had nurtured.

Akako had positioned herself behind the demon, as she thought of him. That damned laser beam from Helmet's gun singed her arm! And now she'd lost the advantage because of stupid, fucking, Helmet.

As Jason X turned on her, she jumped forward and stabbed him with the needle, close up, into the exposed skin where the breastplate left a space on his left side about kidney level. If this serum was going to be effective, it would work better close up, and she wanted to give it the best chance of working.

Behind her she heard a "Fuck," and knew that Helmet's laser had either run out of juice, or was jammed because he stopped firing. He

was too stupid to stop of his own volition.

"Make sure the force field's dismantled," she yelled. With any luck, the moron would do as she told him, so they could escape. Jason X's penetration had weakened it, but the field was not defunct, and neither of them would get through as it now stood, so unless Jason went down, they would go down, and when Jason X faced her, Akako knew she had to stand her ground and fight because there was nowhere to run.

"Fucking get over here and help me take this guy out," she screamed at Helmet behind her, so she couldn't see him, just could feel that he did not join her. Jason X's hand snaked out and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off the ground and dangling her like a puppet as she flailed her arms and legs.

Akako clawed at his eyes, the only vulnerable part the mask exposed, puncturing the pale blue balls. Jason Voorhees roared a sound that was louder than a tidal wave crashing onto land. Face to face, she watched, as the eye sockets grew bloody. Blood overflowed the lower lids, and then, miraculously, began to dry up and the wounds she'd made with her sharp fingernails closed, letting her know that any attack she could get in had a maximum of three seconds afterwards for escape.

Jason's grasp on her waist tightened. His fingers dug into a lung, piercing it, breaking ribs. He squeezed her liver and Akako groaned with the pain; she spat up blood.

Through her haze of agony, she thought logically: somewhere this sucker had to have a vulnerable point. She would not let herself give in to fear, even if she had to die in the process, and it looked like that would be the outcome.

She still held the needle and withdrew it now that the serum was inside him. She used the sharp tip to stab at the hand clutching her, where the skin webbed between the thumb and first finger, exposed because the metal glove had been singed and weakened coming through the force field.

Jason squeezed his hand at her waist so hard she believed his fingers must have met his thumb and formed a closed fist. The snap of ribs and the squish of organs filled her ears and she could feel the

damage, the liver, the seat of life, which is why they called the organ after the state, and it was on her right side and... That anatomical analysis that had distracted her from the pain was cut short by an agony that left her swooning coupled with the new horror; Jason X was raising that damned dangerous knife. It was a third of the length of her body.

Like a gardener pruning a bush, he sliced and cut at her intently, removing chunks of muscle and bone from her shoulders and hips and chest, scaling back her arms and legs. As Akako looked down at her poor, damaged body, she thought she resembled nothing more than the bonsai plant her grandmother had cultivated until the day she died. But this bonsai was red, stained with her blood.

Suddenly Jason X stopped, as if to admire his handiwork. Akako's head lolled against one shoulder and she groaned as her vision blurred. But she refused to scream. She would not give him the satisfaction. Still, she managed to get out the word "Fucker," which seemed to refresh his memory that she was a still living, breathing human being, one whose state he was determined to change.

He focused on her neck. He ripped the sonar needle from his hand and stabbed it into her throat almost delicately, then pulled it out quickly, then in again. Out of the corner of her eye she saw blood spurting like water from a Japanese fountain, the spurts emitted from her carotid artery at the pace of a heartbeat. She watched the Zen-like rhythm, entranced by it, lulled into a strangely peaceful state, until her eyes grew too heavy to hold open and closed forever, as the spurting became a trickle.

Helmet had seen most of what occurred as he frantically worked the force field controls, glancing from them to Jason X and back, again and again. He manipulated the buttons with his right hand, not having a clue as to what the hell he was doing, and so far, none of it made a difference to those vague, wavy, watery movements that told him the thing was still intact. He just wanted that damn force field lifted so he could escape because he'd tried to breach it like Jason X did and for his efforts got a third degree burn on the fingers of his left hand. No fucking nano ants in my system, he thought, knowing he wouldn't heal for a while, if he survived long enough to heal.

Now, with both Bella Morte and Akako dead, and London and that asshole Bardox out of commission, and the fucking laser gun just about out of juice, he was alone, next on Jason X's hit list. That was for sure.

And Jason X turned to him like an iron filing to a magnet, as if to confirm this.

"Shit, shit, shit," Helmet muttered, eyes on Jason X, fingers rapid-fire on the force field controls, pressing buttons indiscriminately, hoping to hell he lucked onto the damned code for STOP. But when Jason X started towards him, he abandoned the controls so he could pull out his almost empty laser with his un-maimed hand. He shot the bastard gun directly in the heart.

The laser went through that metal breastplate. It made a nice round hole, sending smoke from that hole up into the air, turning the metal blue hot around the edges where the beam made contact. Damn if he wasn't a good shot! And Jason X should go down. But he didn't. He only paused. Then he kept coming. And coming.

The lab desk would protect Helmet, or so he imagined. Jason X grabbed the lab table with both hands and ripped it up, exposing the floor of the outer room beneath. He lifted it high above his head and hurled it into the air at Helmet, who barely managed to get out of the way. The table hit the wall at an angle, bounced off it, glanced off the ceiling, and headed down to the floor. As it came down, Jason batted it as if it was a ball and the huge desk flew into the force field. The field sputtered and crackled and the lab table bounced around in mid-air like a balloon kept afloat by air hitting it from underneath. It must have been the last straw for the field because the wavy lines faded and Helmet knew that his escape was imminent. That, or his death; it was now or never.

Suddenly, something grabbed at him from behind, tearing the shirt right off his back. He did not turn to investigate but, shirtless, he raced through the doorway and down the corridor while he had the chance. Jason ran after him, close on his heels. Helmet told himself he had just one small advantage—he knew the layout of this station. Jason didn't. It wasn't much in his favor, but something was better than nothing. If he could lead the goon on a chase around the

station until he lost him, and then get to the shuttle bay, he could board shuttle two and get out of there.

He rounded a corner, glancing back as he did so, watching Jason X gaining on him. "Shit!" he yelled. He leapt into the elevator and hit the button to go down. The door closed just as a fist crashed through it, stopping inches from his face. The elevator descended, Jason X's arm breaking up through the metal of the door to the ceiling of the car, then through that. The elevator headed down to deck four.

Helmet panted, bending forward slightly and bracing himself hands on thighs, his left one painful. He looked up through the opening that the giant arm had created. Above he saw the door to the elevator shaft ripped away, then Jason X poised in the doorway. Fuck if he didn't look as if he was about to leap down the shaft and onto the roof of the elevator.

Helmet hit the button for the next floor and with excruciating slowness the elevator reached deck three. Just as the door opened and he raced out, he heard behind him what could only be Jason X crashing through the roof of the elevator car.

Outracing Jason X had lost its appeal as a good strategy. The guy would never tire, and he was fast, inhumanly fast. An instant revision of plans came to Helmet: if he could just get to the stairs, he could make it down that one more level, then race to the elevator that would take him from the station down into the doughnut hole that would get him to the shuttle bay.

He leapt over the railing and lost his footing, falling down a few steps of the open stairway, spraining his ankle or at least severely straining it. Quickly he righted himself and got down the rest of the stairs, past the landing, down the next flight, ignoring the pain, finally reaching deck four. He raced along the corridor that ran straight ahead as fast as the painful ankle would allow, turned a corner, down the final stretch of corridor, his breath ragged and burning his throat. The elevator lay just ahead but the damned door was closed. Fuck.

He punched the button with his right fist over and over, and then stopped himself. If he broke it, he'd be really screwed. There was no other way down but for the emergency stairs, but they were on the

whole other side of the station and he knew with this ankle he'd never make it to them, let alone down—he was already winded and could feel the ankle swelling as sharp pain stabbed through the nerves to the muscle. Behind, he heard what could only be Jason X stomping hard and fast along the corridor towards him.

In a moment when it seemed, to Helmet, there was a god, the elevator door opened. Simultaneously he entered and hit the only button because the car could only go down. The door closed so damned slowly, and Helmet found himself staring into the face of Jason X, just feet away, watching that hand reach out... But the door closed and the elevator began to descend.

He fell back against the wall of the elevator, gasping for breath, every muscle in his body trembling in exhaustion, the sharp pain in his ankle taking more prominence in his thoughts, the burned left hand a secondary concern. Tears leaked from his eyes and he used the back of his good hand to swipe at them.

Nothing from above, he thought. Would Jason X tear his way through that outer door and leap onto this elevator roof too? Or would he return to the lab and go after Bardox and London? Helmet didn't know. He only knew his body both soared with the adrenaline coursing through him and quivered from the exertion and terror riding his spine, and he struggled to get control of himself. Get to the shuttle bay. That was his only clear thought. Just get there, board the shuttle, and get the fuck out of here.

He told himself he would put out an SOD right away, to get help to G7, to help London and Bardox. *Bardox*. It was all that fucker's fault. Maybe he'd delay that SOS. Bardox deserved payback. London, well, she'd be an unfortunate casualty. He never liked her much anyway, stuck up bitch, preferring that wimpy Andre to Helmet.

As the elevator descended and Helmet felt he was safe, his confidence began to return. He was his own man. He'd outrun the big guy, who wasn't so big apparently that he could catch Helmet, with a twisted ankle and scorched hand and everything. Too many of Bella Morte's stupid Jason X stories. The guy wasn't nearly as bad as they said. You just had to know how to fight him, that's all, and Helmet did!

"Computer," he ordered, his voice deep as he disembarked the elevator. "This elevator is now out of service, got it?"

"By whose authority?" the computer voice asked.

"Mine. Helmet Schmidt. Head of Security. Number seven, zero, seven, zero, seven, S."

"My records indicate that you are Assistant to the Head of Security."

"Not anymore," he said. But knowing the computer would have to have that verified, he elaborated, "By order of the Assistant to the Head of Security. In an emergency situation, I have the authority."

"Verified," the computer said.

Helmet left the elevator door open, not that he intended on going back up. But then he didn't want anything or anyone coming down.

As Bill neared the station, he saw a disturbing sight. The station's caution lights were active, flashing wildly, alerting any passing vessel to the fact that there was trouble on board. Whatever emergency he had left behind had apparently escalated. Damn if he didn't feel stupid for not having installed a com system in the pod! He should have gotten to that but hadn't seen the urgency, amidst all his other jobs, especially since Felicity... He didn't want to think about any of that now.

He wouldn't know the nature of the problem until he docked. Undoubtedly it had something to do with Bardox, who seemed to be the source of all the problems of late, including the death of his sister. Bill didn't know if he would be able to contain himself when he saw the professor. Likely he could not. And in truth he didn't want to. Bardox had better hope that there were others in the vicinity or justice would likely be swift and severe, because Bill was not above meting out a version of the same fate that had befallen Felicity.

He used his universal decoder to begin opening the cargo bay, but then had second thoughts. A hunch, based on what, he didn't know, but he felt strongly that he should store the pod in the shuttle bay, if only because docking and launching were easier from there; it was

set up specifically for vessels to come and go directly, whereas the cargo hold was meant for ships to dock at the station to transfer good and supplies, and required a connecting tunnel. Better to keep the pod with the remaining shuttle. Right now, they had one shuttle to their name, a damaged shuttle too, so the pod might come in handy, depending on the nature of the emergency.

He pressed the remote and the shuttle bay started to open. The moment it did, things began flying out. What the hell? As the door rose, he could see that shuttle two was locked to the dock, but apparently nothing else in there was secure. What was all this?

The vacuum of space pulled objects from the bay and stretched them out of shape. Glass and plastic and metal pieces flew by the pod's window, and strings of red? Then, in an instant too quick for him to really process, if he saw it, a body, a familiar body, lanky, lean and long. And flat. Rushing towards the pod feet first, spinning over and over and over in the airlessness of space, crashing into the pod so that the head end flipped with the heels and the empty flattened features of Andre passed the pod's view window in the blink of an eye. That couldn't be Andre. That whatever it was looked hollowed out. Andre could not survive in space. The vortex would have pulled him inside out. This was a flat mask of Andre's face. An effigy. Bill couldn't be sure of what he saw, and the shock had no time to take effect because the pod was in trouble, and loss of control threatened as debris hit.

Bill struggled to right the pod from the impact. In space, even blowing air at the pod could knock it off course. Fortunately, the beauty of the one-man vessel lay in its maneuverability and he was able to steer clear of the debris sailing out of the shuttle bay.

Finally, he got things under control, not a second too soon because now he was entering the shuttle bay. As the pod passed the doorway, he saw that the space was empty of everything but shuttle two. The glass room walls were gone, the control panels that had been inside it had vanished, the extra suits, the furniture... Everything from the shuttle bay had floated out the door but for the locked-down shuttle. All of it sucked into the void.

Bill fought against the current to keep the pod out of the bay and despite the intense pressure he brought her in smoothly and parked on the other shuttle pad. He locked down the pod then used the remote plus his universal code to close the shuttle bay door. Then he lay in the pod staring out the window at the empty room.

Given what he'd just experienced, he had no idea if the environment in the bay would support life or what. Caution being the better part of valor, he needed to be careful or he would have the air sucked from his lungs in a nano-second. Hell, his lungs would be sucked from his body.

Bill pointed the remote at shuttle two. The door opened, and he lowered the ramp, which was both wide and sturdy enough for loading in heavy items that couldn't easily be lifted. Nothing flew out of the shuttle, which was one good sign.

With the skill of the trained and sensitive navigator that he was, Bill released the docking lock and drove the pod into the shuttle. He pulled up the ramp with the remote, then closed and locked the shuttle door.

If only he were facing the control panels, he could have read the conditions inside the shuttle at least, but the only way he could drive the pod in was to have her facing aft. Still, his suit should protect him. He hoped.

He took a breath and opened the pod's gullwing. So far so good, he thought. If the interior of the shuttle was not set to support life, he would probably have floated up and might be glued to the ceiling by now, but he wasn't.

He walked the length of shuttle two, which Bardox had brought back to the station, minus his sister. The interior was pretty wrecked. It looked as if it had been through a war, components that should have been locked into place on walls and consoles lay askew on the floor, the pilot's chair tilted, glass dials had cracked, but Bill figured that was just sloppy takeoff and landing on Bardox's part. He'd already noted that the exterior had a dent and scrape along the side that likely came from skidding too close to the bay door. Unfortunately it was the side with the power supply, and that likely

meant trouble. He'd have to deal with that after he reported in. Having a working shuttle was priority number one on any station.

Bill flipped on the shuttle's power. There was some damage to the power source. It would not charge fully, and looked as if there was a leak; likely that happened with the scrape. It could be fixed and it would be his first job once he checked out the emergency on the station. And, he knew himself well enough that he couldn't hide the truth. Once he'd found Bardox. Fixing the shuttle was the priority of Bill the engineer. Fixing Bardox was the priority of Bill, brother of Felicity.

He tried the com unit, but that, too, had been damaged. He couldn't immediately see the source of the problem there. That was disturbing. Fuel leak. No communications device. Damn it, they were so vulnerable without a working shuttle! One damaged shuttle, for the entire crew of this station. Bardox would have to wait.

A quick scan showed four life signs on the station, which could not be, so the scanner too was malfunctioning. He had his work cut out for him, but first, he had to hope the reading of the shuttle bay's life support signs was accurate, because they said he could enter the bay.

Finally, he reached under the pilot's station for the black box, only to find the slot empty. Great. He knew it must have existed when Felicity took the shuttle out. He'd opened the exit for her himself. He was in the glass room that no longer existed. He had read all the control panels and if that box had been missing then, the computer would have noted it. It was not. That meant that someone had taken it. He wondered if that someone was Bardox.

Bill opened the door of the shuttle and started down the ramp. Again, he didn't float to the ceiling, so the conditions must be habitable. The place was wrecked. Everything that had been stationary had been torn out and sucked into space to drift forever, along with that thing that looked like Andre. That grim sight came to him now, and the strings of red, which he suddenly knew was blood. What the hell happened here? The entire sealed room was gone and only one or two buttons remained on the wall, for opening and sealing the two doors of the bay, to outer space and to the corridor.

Bill opened his hand and the remote stayed in his palm. Good. Likely all was well, but there had been some accident in this place. That room was supposed to be shatterproof. Yet another Earth II invention that didn't live up to its reputation, he thought. The glass room was gone and he knew in his heart that so was Andre.

He removed a glove first and when the flesh of his wrist did not get sucked off the bone, on impulse he stopped partway and removed his helmet instead. He could breathe the air, and his eyes didn't pop out. He'd better get up to the station itself and find out what the hell was happening.

He entered the hallway and headed straight for the elevator at the end of the corridor. The door was open but the elevator was not there. He looked up the shaft but could see nothing in the darkness. He pressed the button but there was no light.

"Computer," he said, "bring down the elevator."

The computer voice responded, "This elevator is out of service."

"Great," he said to the anonymous voice. "I'm really in the mood to hike up almost seventeen hundred stairs. Okay, I'll bite. Why is it out of service?"

"Due to an emergency on the station."

"What's the nature of the emergency?"

"Intruder on the station."

That gave him pause.

"Identity of intruder?"

"Unknown."

"Gender?"

"Male."

"Is the intruder human?"

He didn't know why he asked that, and was astonished when the computer responded, "Unknown."

"You mean he isn't human." He said that more as a statement, but the computer responded anyway.

"DNA is present."

Bill knew it was futile because he himself had programmed the parameters into the computer but he asked anyway, "Location of intruder?"

"That information can be obtained at the central computer terminal on the bridge."

"I knew that."

It seemed to him that the entire communications system was down. How could there be an intruder that was and was not human? How could there be an intruder at all? It sounded screwy.

He thought about using the universal code to get the elevator up and running but then realized that not knowing the extent of the emergency, he might be doing further harm to the station. What if this elevator was locked to keep the so-called intruder from the shuttle bay? What if the intruder was a viral or bacterial infection? Or if there was a fire in the shaft or on deck four, where the elevator would stop? Any of that would not only put himself at risk but the entire shuttle bay as well, and maybe the rest of the crew.

At least he was within com range so he could contact the others and find out what was going on. "Bill Lawrence to Renata, come in."

"Renata Henderson is unavailable."

"Okay. Who's scheduled on the bridge?"

"Akako Tsunami."

"Akako, come in. It's Bill."

"Akako Tsunami is unavailable."

"Number of personnel on the station?"

"Five."

"Right," Bill said. The damned com system was completely down, it seemed, so he didn't know what to believe or what to think, but he was beginning to wonder if the emergency might be a technical one, like the life support almost crashing shuttle bay and killed Andre. The station could on them. Maybe life support malfunctioned in the have shut down the elevator to protect the station from whatever malfunction had happened down here.

He'd better play it safe and take the emergency stairs at least up to deck four. Probably all the way to the bridge, although that would be more like two thousand steps.

He headed back down the corridor, circling the doughnut hole to the other side and opened the door to the steep, narrow stairwell, which was intended to be used for emergencies. He'd gone up and

down this stairwell with its thousands of steps once before, when he and Felicity had a race within a week of when they first boarded the station—they started at the end of the corridor on deck one, and whoever got to the stairs first had the advantage because it was only wide enough for one. He got there first, and going down was a breeze. Well maybe not a breeze but it wasn't impossible. Down at the bottom of the doughnut hole they raced to the far wall of that corridor, touched the wall, then back to the stairs and up. Hell, he'd tripped over his own damned feet, fallen, got up but not fast enough, because Felicity leap-frogged over him. He chased her to the top, inches away, both of them pretty wrecked by all those steps up in the humid corridor that he figured must be what a birth canal felt like, but back on deck one she made it to that damned wall first, like she always did. Both of them gasping, sides splitting, nearly dehydrated, but finally laughing from the belly. She had been his big sister, he her little brother, minutes behind her in birth. She'd always led the way.

Bill started climbing the steps with a heavy heart, Felicity's presence filling the stairwell. She should be alive. It was all Bardox's fault.

London got to her knees groggily. But the second she saw what remained of the bodies of Bella Morte and Akako, she came fully awake, on the defensive. The devastated remains of her friends and co-workers caused her stomach to lurch and despite superhuman efforts to avoid it, she vomited for a full minute, so intensely that finally only bitter bile seared up her throat and came out of her mouth and nose. Gasping, she realized with some relief that Jason X wasn't here, and that was a good thing considering how out of control she was. But then Helmet wasn't here either. Or Bardox. Then she heard a groan and saw a form almost hidden by the remains of the lab table and other debris. From the clothing she saw it was Bardox. Not the person she would have chosen to survive here, but then any survivors would have done at this point.

She crawled to him amidst the broken glass and fragments of the shattered lab desk, lifting larger pieces of trash as she went to make sure there were no more bodies, or parts thereof. Bardox lay on his back groaning, his eyes black and blue, his nose swollen and caked with dried blood, and from its angle clearly broken. Now she remembered that it was Helmet, the fool, who had done this.

"Bardox. Professor Bardox! Can you hear me?"

"Yes... yes Miss Jefferson, I can hear you, but please stop screaming."

"I'm not screaming."

"Oh. I see." She saw slanting eyelids that exposed eyes laced with pain fluttered open and closed; his hand reached up as if to touch his nose but instead flopped listlessly to his side. "My face feels... painful."

"I'm sure it does. Come on." London slipped her hands behind his back and pulling him to a seated position. "We've got to get out of here. Let me help you up."

All the while Bardox groaned and put no effort into sitting up under his own steam, which made her job harder. "Am I badly injured?"

"Your nose is broken. I think that's it."

"It's excruciating," he said, as if this were the first physical injury he'd sustained in his life, and, she thought, as if this relatively minor injury mattered, given everything that had happened so far, especially the massacre of Bella Morte and Akako.

London felt impatient with him and snapped, "Look, I'll help you, hold my hand, but you've got to make an effort to pull yourself up. Try to stand."

She got to her feet and he grasped her hand and she staggered under the full weight of him, but finally he was using his own legs as support, weaving a little, but standing.

"Lean against this," she said, righting a chair and pulling it over to him so that he could put his good hand on the back of it and brace himself. Meanwhile, she found a cloth and wet it under the tap in the corner. "I'll clean you up a bit," she said, wiping clotted blood from

his nostrils, nose and eyes, and blood that had dried from his chin and lips.

"You're very mothering," he murmured.

London pulled the cloth back. What the hell? The guy must have suffered a concussion too. He was an ass but he deserved human consideration. She focused on the word "human," since he might be the only other one that came under that category on this station. London did not kid herself that Jason X was dead. At best, she hoped the serum had worked and they would find him docile and that would allow them time to reach the shuttle. But that was not the most realistic scenario. She'd rather dwell on the probable rather than the possible right now.

Finally she rinsed out the bloody cloth and handed it to Bardox. "Keep this at the bridge of your nose. The cold will help with the pain. There's not much else we can do for you right now, until we get off this station."

"Off the station?" He pulled the cloth away from his face and stared at her with horror in his bloodshot eyes. "You mean take the shuttle?"

"That's exactly what I mean. As far as I know, we're the only two left."

Bardox glanced around the room for the first time, seeing what was left of Bella Morte and Akako. His eyes reflected the scene before him and he nodded absently. "And Mr Schmidt?"

"Helmet? Who knows? He's probably dead."

"Did the serum work?"

"I couldn't tell you. I was unconscious. All I know for certain is that Jason X isn't here and Helmet isn't here and we have the opportunity of a lifetime to leave the station now."

London did a quick digital check with the computer—besides Bardox and herself, there were three life signs aboard, all male. What the hell? Jason X, Helmet, and... who? Now she was worried. It was only from the bridge that she could ascertain where they were located on the station. And talking to the computer would be bad under the circumstances; it would alert whoever was on the station that she existed. Who, or whatever. She had no time to speculate,

and imaginings would only leave her more frightened. Her priority was clear—get herself and Bardox to safety, fast.

She took his arm and began moving him out the door and down the corridor.

Bardox pulled back slightly. "But if the serum worked, and there's no reason to assume that it did not, then Jason X should be as gentle as a lamb."

"Professor Bardox, does this look like a lamb to you?" She waved a hand at the destroyed elevator ahead of them where something had smashed through the door. It could only be one thing.

"That might have happened before the injection."

"Unlikely. He came along the corridor for us, almost scenting us, and according to the scan of the corridor, he didn't stop. This happened after Akako injected him, if she injected him, because neither you nor I were conscious at the time and we don't know what happened, although we know that after he destroyed Akako and Bella Morte and left the lab, he managed to do this. Maybe Jason X is sleeping it off in some hidden nook or cranny of the station, but I doubt it. There's no reason to think the serum worked. It looks to me like Helmet got away, or at least took this elevator, although there's no way of knowing if his was a temporary or permanent escape."

London tried pressing the button. When that didn't work, she pried open the damaged door and looked down into the shaft. Far below, the door of the elevator must have been left open where it came to rest one deck below, what looked to be deck three. She could see light that came in from that corridor and up through the crushed elevator roof. That it had made it to deck three told her that Helmet had headed for the shuttle bay, which meant he planned to get off the station in the only shuttle, leaving her and Bardox stranded. "Fucking monster," she murmured, then wondered if he had only gotten as far as deck three because Jason X had caught up with him.

"Calling him that is rather unkind, don't you think? From what is known of Jason X's past, he had an unfortunate childhood—"

"I'm not talking about Jason X."

She pressed the button but nothing happened. The elevator was obviously out of order which meant they needed to take the stairs

and it was a long walk down to the lowest level of the station from here, then down further into the doughnut hole where the shuttle bay was located—hopefully that elevator was working.

It was pretty clear to London that Jason X had stalked Helmet, and that he was far from tranquilized. From the life sign reading, he and Jason X were both still alive, and... someone else. She just hoped that Helmet hadn't yet reached the shuttle. Or—God help her from the thought—that Jason X had stopped him. That the shuttle was still in the bay, and that it wasn't too damaged from Bardox's insane expedition.

"Perhaps we should try to locate Jason X on the computer," Bardox interrupted her thoughts.

"I checked. The computer brought up several life signs, one of which is probably Jason X. We don't know which is which, or where they are." She didn't mention the third sign. The less Bardox knew the better.

"Surely we can ask the computer for Helmet's whereabouts. And the whereabouts of Jason X? Well, the 'intruder' as the computer would call him."

"To find their exact location we would have to go to the bridge, and we're headed down, to the shuttle bay. We're getting out of here."

"But the communications system can put us in touch with Helmet. Surely he can tell us where he is, and where Jason X is, if he knows."

London was really losing her patience now. She explained to him as if he were a child, "Professor Bardox, to do that, we'd have to interact with the computer verbally and that will give away our voices and our location, and that I won't do. Jason X might have forgotten that we exist, and I'd rather not remind him. In case you haven't noticed, he's a cold blooded killer. As we go down these stairs, I think we should be as quiet as we can be. Understand me?"

Bardox nodded, which motion obviously sent pain coursing through his face and he moaned and pressed the wet cloth to his nose and closed his eyes.

The two began the slow descent, Bardox breathing heavily through his mouth, almost gulping air, and London was at the edge of jamming that wet bloody cloth into his mouth to keep him silent.

Already his eyes were swollen almost shut so that he peered with bloodshot eyes through even narrowest of slits, and the bruised surrounding tissue made him resemble a raccoon.

London had recovered her energy and now operated on sheer adrenaline. If they could just get into the shuttle bay and board shuttle two, and if it hadn't been damaged too much, they could get off the station and send an interspace message asking for help. In the event it was damaged and wouldn't fly, they could still send a message, but the chances of rescue before Jason X found them were minimal. It would take about two weeks for another vessel to arrive. Dodging Jason X for two weeks would take a miracle. And hadn't Jason X already taken out the crew of two vessels?

All of this added up to a lot of "ifs" to contend with, but they surely could not stay on this station. Not with Jason X roaming around, and she believed he was still here, with the tuned senses of a predator and the physical power and persistence of a machine, not to mention the ability to keep repairing himself for eternity.

Images flickered through her mind, of the bodies of the sweet and gentle Bella Morte, and the feisty Akako. Of the friends who were missing and presumed dead, like Felicity and her beloved Stanislav, of scenes London hadn't actually seen but could well imagine, like the death of Renata as Helmet left her to fight Jason X alone. And then there were the remains of Andre, which she did not need to envision, since they would be waiting for her in the shuttle bay. She tried to steel herself for what she would see. Grim as that reality was, avoiding Jason X and the fate worse than natural death which he offered was her priority. She had always known that one day she might end up in charge of things, and that day was now. She had the wherewithal to be a leader. She had to have it. Her life and at least one other depended on her abilities.

As they moved like snails down the stairs, she wished Bardox was someone, anyone else. Or that he was not there at all. Uncharitable as that seemed, she knew her chances of survival diminished with him in tow, not the least reason being that he didn't seem to be aware of just how dangerous Jason X was, and that manifested in dragging himself at a ridiculous pace. Plus the constant sounds he made, like

now, when he just blurted out, "I must rest, my dear. I'm not as young as I once was."

"Jesus," she whispered as his voice echoed around the open stairwell and the corridors that stretched out from it on every deck like three legs. London was pretty sure that if Jason X was within earshot, he had heard them by now. With those super-refined abilities, he had likely pinpointed their exact location too.

Part of her wanted to say to Bardox, "You wait here, I'll go check out the shuttle and come back for you," but she knew that was false. What she really longed for was to abandon him, and that she could never do, not and live with herself, even if dragging the obnoxious Bardox along meant she would lose her life in the process.

After a pause that seemed longer than the three minutes it took, London whispered in Bardox's ear as if he were a child, "Come on. We've got to go. It's just one more flight to the elevator. You've got to do it, and you've got to be silent. We don't know where Jason X is and any sound you make will reach his ears quickly."

Bardox peered up at her through the slits of blackened eyes and said, "You will make a wonderful mother," in a voice too loud.

It took all of London's self control not to scream at this lunatic to shut the fuck up! Instead she placed a finger to her lips in the universal gesture for silence, and helped Bardox to his feet.

All the way down the two flights between deck three and deck four he moaned and groaned and shuffled his feet in a way that echoed throughout the stairwell. She could have wrung his neck! Didn't he know he was endangering them? She felt this intense need to protect herself, as if doing so were more important than she could understand; she reasoned that someone had to alert Earth II and the other stations and ships out in this galaxy to the presence of the fiend Jason X. Otherwise, all life as it was now understood to be would be eliminated, some even before it came into existence.

Finally, they reached deck four. "Wait here," she whispered into Bardox's ear. She peered around the stairs each way at the two corridors that stretched out and circled the stairwell. Then, cautiously, she went down the corridor straight ahead of her and moved along it sideways close to the wall until she reached the end,

wishing all the while she had a weapon of some kind, any kind of weapon! There she took a quick peek around the corner. The door to the elevator that would go to the doughnut hole stood wide open, but the elevator was not inside. What could that mean? The elevator must be below, where else could it have been?

She edged along that corridor until she reached the elevator and, standing at the doorway, looked down the shaft into the blackness. She could see nothing, could hear no sound. She glanced behind her, making sure that Jason X wasn't creeping up on her, catching her off guard, but she was alone. She had a small penlight in her pocket and focused it down into the long tunnel, moving it in a small circle. The motion-sensitive light went on but was overwhelmed by the gloom and there was nothing to see, just walls and pressure panels that controlled the elevator's rise and fall. The shaft was way too deep for the small beam to reveal anything much, so she lifted it out and the light faded.

London pressed the elevator button and listened. She thought she heard movement down there. It would take the elevator about one hundred and eighty seconds to arrive on this deck and she should get Bardox now. They couldn't afford to waste any time at all.

She edged back along the wall of the corridor slowly and soundlessly and peered around the corner. There was no Jason X waiting for her. But there was also no Bardox.

London moved down the center of that corridor rapidly. When she reached the stairs she glanced down the corridor to the left and the one to the right: no sign of him, at least at first. Then she noticed drops of blood spaced intermittently down the right corridor. Why the hell had he not stayed here like she had ordered him? Now she'd have to find the idiot to get him to safety! There was nothing to do but follow the trail of blood and hope she could locate him fast, otherwise she'd have to abandon him, and damn, she knew she couldn't do that, even as she toyed with the idea. Damn him!

She moved along the wall of the right corridor, avoiding the railing that overlooked the open stairwell, following the blood dots as if they were breadcrumbs leading her not away from but right to the witch's house with the oven where the nasty sorceress planned to roast

Hansel and Gretel alive. She laughed and laughed at the idea of the girl and her brother being so dumb as to leave breadcrumbs to find their way back, because everybody knew that birds would eat them. And she'd always thought they were not too bright in the first place to go inside the witch's house, just because it was made of gingerbread, whatever that was! And yet here she was, following what were essentially breadcrumbs, on her way to what felt instinctively like her doom. All thanks to Professor Claude Bardox.

FOURTEEN

Helmet finally reached the shuttle bay. He got the door back on spring-lock hinges and locked first thing, then turned and there it was, waiting for him, the oh-so-lovely shuttle two.

"Yes," he said, smashing a fist into the air above his head. "I'm a survivor," he assured himself, not like the other wimps on the station. Fleeting images of a naked feisty Akako danced through his brain, and he wished she'd made it and could have escaped with him. They could have some fun in the shuttle until they were rescued. She'd have been awed by his cleverness at outwitting Jason X.

He glanced around the empty bay, noticing right off that apart from shuttle two, everything that had been here before was gone now. There were no suits in the glass room, and there was no glass room. It had all vanished as if it had never existed: the furniture, the control panels that had been part of the consoles, all the space suits, even Andre's body. This was weird! Fucking weird! But he didn't waste time wondering where everything had gone. He opened the shuttle door manually from the outside and entered quickly. He just wanted to get out.

"What the hell's this piece of junk?" he said, looking over the long silver cylinder the size of a man that took up so much of the space inside the shuttle. He was about to toss it out when he realized this might be Bill's one-man pod. Maybe it would come in handy later. Maybe Bill made it back here. Not his problem either way.

He pressed the button that sent a wall across the shuttle, trapping everything behind the captain's chair, leaving just the cockpit, which was more manageable. Besides, he needed to make sure that no one but him had access to this shuttle and the less space available, the better to police it.

Helmet sat at the controls and turned on the power. He'd only flown a shuttle twice but figured if that egghead Bardox could do it, anybody could, even him with little experience, although he was not so sure of what to do next.

He had no suit but figured the shuttle would protect him from the dangers of space, at least as long as it took to make a call and get rescued.

The power didn't crank up as fast or as far as he remembered it should, though he put it on max. Bardox had bashed the shuttle into the side of the station so maybe that affected the power. He didn't know for sure, just knew he had to get the docking hatch door open and get out.

Grimly, he sat back and realized that the launch and docking mechanisms were outside the shuttle, on the wall of what had once been the glass room. There used to be a timed delay button, but that was on the control desk and there was no control desk now. But how in hell could he leave the shuttle, go press the button, and get back into the shuttle before the door to space began to open? And when that door opened it would create a vacuum and maybe kill him, or even suck him out into space with the same result. "Shit." He pounded the control panel a few times, making it tremble, until finally a hairline crack appeared in the console and he stopped.

"Idiot," he told himself. "You're as stupid as everybody says you are." But berating himself would get him nowhere. He had to use his head. He thought for a minute: if he found a space suit, and some rope, he could set up a tether line between him and the shuttle to keep him inside the bay, press the button and get back inside the shuttle fast, then get the hell off this cursed station.

Where did they keep extra suits? He had no idea. There were always half a dozen in the glass room. There had to be others, one for every crewmember and a few extras. He'd just have to go hunt for them. They had to be down there somewhere, maybe in one of the cargo bays. Whatever, he had to find a suit and find one fast.

Helmet turned the power way down, but kept her running on low, just so he'd be ready to roll, not that it mattered because the shuttle's power sounded the same on low as on high, which worried him. On his way out of the bay he left the shuttle door open and the ramp down. Then he tried to leave the door to the corridor open too, but it closed automatically and he had nothing to prop it open with.

He hobbled down the hall on a painful ankle and opened the door to the first of two cargo bays and entered. The suits were not obvious so if they were there they must be packed. He began opening closets, drawers, containers, tossing everything into the air. His frantic pace had him sweating profusely, only partially from activity. Mostly the icy sweat of fear chilled him. "Where in hell are those suits?" He had to have a suit to get off the damned station. At least he found some stretch cord, which was half of what he needed.

He left the first cargo bay and started down the corridor, further around the curve, when suddenly, he heard a sound and looked back over his shoulder; nothing there. But the sound had been real, that he knew. It reverberated as if the emergency stairwell door on the other side of the bay deck had closed. "Shit!" he breathed quietly, picking up his feet.

Inside cargo bay #2 he made a fast search through the closets and soon found the spare suits. He yanked one out and donned it quickly, picked up the rope and headed back to the shuttle bay as fast as the bulky outfit would let him move and on the way realized he should have carried the suit to the shuttle bay and put it on there. Idiot.

Once he was safely back in the shuttle bay, he entered the shuttle and looped one end of the stretchy rope around the navigational panel, one of the few things that was solidly fixed inside. Everything behind the pilot's seat was blocked off, so nothing would fly out when the hatch door opened. He wondered if the pilot's seat might fly out, but there was nothing he could do about that, so long as he didn't fly out.

He moved across the room stretching the rope with him, the job harder the farther he got from the shuttle and the tauter the rope grew. He made his way steadily towards the two lonely buttons left in what had been the glass control room. Why in hell had they positioned these buttons just to the right of the space door? Much further to get to, but then he figured nobody had guessed that the "shatterproof room" would shatter.

The trick was in the timing: he had to press the "OPEN" button then, twenty seconds later, the door to space would begin to rise. And that door would stay open for three minutes. Once he was in the

shuttle it should take only thirty seconds to open the locks that anchored the shuttle then drive her out the door. The trick was getting from the button to the shuttle within those twenty seconds. Once that door opened, everything not nailed down in the bay would be pulled outside, not that there was be anything left in the bay to be sucked out into space but him! He figured on the rope acting like a stretched rubber band. Once he pressed the button, he'd relax and the cord would yank him back across the room to the shuttle fast! Then he just had to run up the ramp, close the shuttle door, unlock the anchors, and drive this baby away from here. He'd be home free.

Hell, when the doors opened, space would pull the shuttle out. All he had to do was steer! Oh, and he had to remember to avoid that damned captain's chair, which he fully expected would hurtle out of the shuttle.

It was a plan, a simple plan, a good one. No, it was a great plan. They'd always called him simple. "Simple is smart," he yelled at all the people who once said it outright or alluded to him being dumb. He nodded to himself. "Yeah, who's laughing now, huh?"

The second Helmet reached the button he stretched out his arm and pressed "OPEN." Instantly the red light over it began to flash and the loud continuous beep sounded the warning that in twenty seconds the bay door would begin to open.

He let himself relax and his body sprang back towards the shuttle. Instantly he lost his balance and fell, right on the bad ankle. The rope dragging him along the floor a few yards as he struggled to his feet. Almost there, he started to laugh. All this had only taken maybe five seconds. Plenty of time left!

He laughed until he felt himself pulled not towards the shuttle but away, back in the direction of the door to enter the corridor. He turned his head slightly and saw Jason Voorhees in the doorway, propping open the door with his body. One of his one hands was pulling on the rope, wrapping it around his fist, slowly, relentlessly moving Helmet towards him, like reeling in a fish. His other hand held that ferocious knife or whatever the hell it was, narrower at the hilt, wider at the tip, culminating in a nasty point on each side of the

tip. If it sliced open Helmet's suit, he would perish instantly when the space door opened.

"Shit!" Helmet screamed, frantically swimming away, the heavy space boots sliding on instead of gripping the floor, getting nowhere fast. He struggled to untie the triple knot he'd made in the rope at his waist with the bulky gloves he wore, tearing off the glove from his right hand for the fine work. Then he realized he'd have to catch the rope to give it some slack so he wrapped it around his left, burnt fist. He still wore the glove but it hurt anyway. Didn't matter, he had to hold it. He had to untangle the knots.

Closer and closer, and he had the first knot then the second undone. Fingers trembling, he used all his physical strength to hold his ground, but Jason X was stronger, and despite Helmet's efforts his feet slid inevitably towards what felt like his fate.

Then, three yards away, Voorhees brought that knife down fast. In a moment of genius, Helmet pulled back as far as he could and turned sideways. The blade missed his body, missed the suit, but connected with the stretch cord. The cord end that Jason X held snapped into the monster's face, causing him to fall back a step, and that allowed the spring lock corridor door to close.

Helmet had done it. He'd won. He'd beaten Jason X. Again.

Then he remembered the twenty seconds. He turned and raced for the shuttle, lifting the heavy boots as fast as he could, running full out, but his legs wouldn't lift quickly enough with triple their weight.

He saw the light on the wall go from red to green and heard the door to outer space lifting. Just as Jason had pulled him, airless space relentlessly began to pull him in the other direction, so fast he couldn't believe it. He reached out to clutch at something, anything, but it felt like the hand of God, or the devil. Something invisible was pulling him out, and there was nothing to hold onto.

His body rose up towards the ceiling and forward at the same time, and soon slammed into the wide door as it continued to rise. Air pressure pasted him against it and he looked around in horror. The suit was protecting him, except for his bare hand. He glanced down to see it, pale and shriveling before his eyes, and it exploded. The

hand became particles that were drawn down and sucked out of the bay.

But Helmet had no time to feel any new pain, or mourn the loss of his hand. His single thought was to hang onto the edge of the opening door, grip it hard with his remaining hand until the door began to close. Just hang on, he thought. Maybe the pressure would keep him pressed against this rising wall, keep him alive...

Helmet believed this even as his body began to slip down the door. He clutched at the metal behind him that was the only barrier between him and emptiness. His gloved hand slipped down the edge of the door, and grabbed onto nothing. In a flash the vortex caught him and pulled him out into space.

He screamed. But no one could hear.

He knew this was worse than death. His air would last three, maybe four hours, and then he would suffocate. His body would float in space, eventually rotting inside this suit because of the microorganisms that all human bodies play host to. His flesh would decompose, the muscle, the organs, finally, over time, the bone. And then only his soul would be left, the soul he had forgotten he possessed, trapped in this deflated space suit, alone, for eternity.

At least Jason X hadn't gotten him. He was smart enough to escape the intergalactic serial killer, and that was something. But the small victory gave him absolutely no comfort, and way too little satisfaction.

His mother would have said that what awaited him was a simple death. A simple death tailor made for a simple man.

Jason X sensed emptiness. Behind the door that had just shut in front of him, lay nothing. He had no idea where the human had gone; he just knew he was no longer there. No smell, no sound, no feel that he existed. No longer a threat, an enemy to be eliminated.

Without thought or direction, Jason Voorhees turned his back on the door as if it had never existed. He heard a sound and stopped. It did not come from the way he had come from but the other direction

in this circle, and he turned towards it striding briskly around the corridor, passing doors, knowing there was nothing living on the other side.

He came to a door and stopped. A human. Not the same human, another one. One that drew him and he could no more have stopped himself from opening that door than he could stop himself from destroying all in his path.

He took the stairs three at a time. Above there was a clank, followed by one behind him. Somewhere, the scent of someone else, but it faded fast. Whoever it was, he would find them, eventually. Now he had two victims to stalk, and he headed up.

Each deck was laid out the same, open stairwell down through the center of the station surrounded by a circular corridor on each level that had two branches, each going around the stairwell. A third branch from the stairs went to the main elevator. A fourth branch directly opposite the stairs around the circular corridors went to the emergency stairs.

The circular corridors contained rooms: on Decks #2 and #3 the private quarters of the crew. deck one held the bridge. deck three the hospital. deck four the security office, engineering and the labs, and the elevator down into the doughnut hole where the shuttle bay was located. Where London longed to be right now.

She followed the blood trail until it ceased to speckle the corridor floor. She was almost at the emergency stairs and could either continue along the other half of the circular corridor, or go into the emergency stairwell. Despite his condition, Bardox could have taken either of those. Maybe he went to the bridge, so he could ask the computer where Jason X was. He could also be in a room along either half of the circular corridor. She didn't have a clue as to why he'd snuck off so she couldn't even guess where he was headed, but something told her he was not in the emergency stairwell headed to the bridge. Still, since she was right here, she opened the door and listened for a moment. Nothing.

She closed the door and continued around the corridor, rewarded for her good decision with a drop of blood outside the door to the room where lab supplies were kept. Now why was Bardox here?

London tried to open the door manually, but it didn't budge. She refused to pound on it, didn't want to alert Jason X of her whereabouts. It wouldn't take much for her to give it up and let Bardox, the bastard, rot. Still, he was injured, probably not mentally all there. She knew, though, that he could see her on the camera in the storage room, since every room on the station had a camera aimed at the corridor outside the door.

She moved back a few steps and looked up at the pinhole above the door where a camera the size of a pin was mounted within. She mouthed the words, "Let me in."

Nothing. She tried again. "Let me in dammit."

If Bardox was in there, he was being stubborn. She could wait him out, unless he took the back exit, which every room had, a narrower corridor along the periphery of the station that led directly to the emergency stairs.

This was so insane, she thought. She was stuck there, trying to rescue a madman who didn't have the sense to know he needed rescuing. If she went to the bridge, she could get a fix on where everybody was, and even send him a person-to-person message, bypassing the main com system. But he wouldn't likely answer her. And by the time she got back he would probably be somewhere else on the station.

Maybe she should have set up another universal lockdown. That way, he would be forced out into the open. But that would create new problems, the least of which being that every door and elevator on the station would be inaccessible, not just to Bardox, but to her. She would be out in the open. So would Jason X.

Still, if she went up to the bridge she could at least check on the position of the life signs on the station. If Bardox was on the move, she'd see his direction, and she'd also see where Helmet was as well.

And Jason Voorhees.

She should be able to do a minimal diagnostic on the shuttle from there, which would at least tell her if it was spaceworthy, not that she

wanted to know if it wasn't. And, her stomach cramped at the thought, it would tell her if the shuttle was still in the shuttle bay.

Every cell in her body screamed: Just go down to the shuttle bay and get out of here, she thought. But her conscience tripped her up, as it usually did. Most of the time she was grateful that she had a conscience, which allowed her to possess solid values, values her parents had instilled in her that meant she treated everyone and everything in the universe with respect. Sometimes, though, like right now, she wished that conscience would take Bardox here, taking off, and calling for help, that a nap. No matter how she rationalized it, leaving help arriving in fourteen days or so at the earliest... he would be dead and she would be responsible. He was like a precocious child, quick, intelligent, and at the same time emotionally stunted. Not to mention his crude social skills. Still, that child-like quality brought out a protective instinct in her that she wished she didn't possess. She would do the same for any of the crewmembers, stay and rescue them, even if it meant her life. Her body trembled. She did not want to die. Every fragment of a cell in her pleaded for survival.

It was useless to stay there, contemplating all this. She would not leave without Bardox, as long as he was alive. She felt honor-bound to rescue the damned man, despite not liking one thing about him. He was human; she had an obligation. And Helmet, who she did not trust at all, was either on the station, or in the shuttle, or dead. And if he was still here and alive, she couldn't leave him here either.

London, resigned to her caring fate, turned and headed back to the emergency stairwell. At least it was a plan that left her doing more than mouthing demands at a camera lens.

Inside the emergency stairwell the air felt dense and charged, and a low hum sent a mild vibration through the steps. Four decks up to the bridge, each deck with two sets of stairs, with about forty steps on each, which were three hundred and twenty steps to the bridge.

Suddenly she heard a sound, one above, then another one below. One must be Helmet, and her first instinct was to call out which, fortunately, she suppressed. The other sound had to be Jason X.

Jason was in one direction and Helmet in the other. She had no idea which way to go. Making the wrong decision would cost her life.

She backed out of the stairwell and closed the door quietly. She could take the main stairs in the center of the station. There were just as many of them, and although they were more exposed, at least she wouldn't be trapped in the narrow emergency stairwell. From the main stairwell, it was a short corridor to the main elevator. She wanted to avoid the elevator. It would draw attention to her. And from the damage it sustained, it might not even be working. She shivered at the idea of being trapped in an elevator.

Every instinct said, go down. With a heavy heart, she rounded the corridor and lifted a foot to the first step going up, as far away from the center of the station as she could be to avoid detection. She might as well put some energy into it. This was a long hike. Good thing she worked out daily, although dread crouched in the pit of her stomach and kept her from being as light-footed and climbing as fast as she normally would have. She hadn't eaten in a while; maybe her energy was down. And then she thought of Andre's remains, still waiting for her below, and maybe that was part of the reason she hesitated from going down to the shuttle bay. Thoughts of food vanished. She figured it would be a long time until she felt hungry again.

Bill left the emergency stairwell on deck one. Although his jaw dropped, he did not pause to examine the chaos on the bridge, just headed through the damaged door and down the corridor to the main stairwell. Safety first. He scanned the corridor that circled the main stairwell on the deck. Nobody. He leaned over the railing once when he thought he heard a sound below. Down the center of the circle all the way at the bottom was the floor of deck four. His eyes scanned the stairs coming up or what he could see of them, and no one came into view. The pause gave him a chance to catch his breath; he was pretty winded. Two thousand steps—they had seemed easier before, but six months ago he might have been in better shape physically, definitely emotionally.

He paused was to get a grip. The bridge was a mess. He was afraid of what he would find.

He went back down the short corridor to the bridge and cautiously re-entered by the huge hole torn open in the main door, a door he told himself was nearly impossible to breach. What could have happened here? This made no sense.

Senses alert, he stepped through the torn opening wishing he had a weapon. Inside, the bridge was wrecked, furniture destroyed, one of the larger view screens damaged, and everything blood-streaked as if someone had taken gallons of blood and splashed it around the place. He noticed the control buttons on the main console, the row set on blue, meaning on automatic, and the light above the universal lock that Akako set off, meaning they had dismantled it. They needed to escape.

Bill pressed the button for the com system to do a self-diagnostic. While he waited for the numbers to crunch, he headed towards the wall cabinet that held a few laser weapons, to be used in the unlikely event that the bridge was under attack by an intruder or intruders hell-bent on taking it over. He remembered how they had all laughed long and hard about that—who in hell would want to take over the bridge of a station circling a planet like #666 with a crew of eleven, mostly scientists? The idea didn't seem as amusing now.

He used his universal code to release the particle-wave lock on the cabinet door. Inside were three laser guns, and a stun gun.

A beep at the main computer terminal told him that the system had checked itself.

"Report," he said, as he sorted through the weapons.

"Com system in maximum working order."

He turned his head sharply to look at the computer panel, as if the voice were lying. How could it be if it said there were only four life signs on board, one of which was not exactly human?

Okay, calm down, he ordered himself. He left the weapon's cabinet temporarily to go and punch in a numeric distress call that would beam through space in all directions, knowing it would move faster than a vocal message. Meanwhile, he demanded of the computer, "Number of life signs on board the station?"

"Four."

"Identify."

"Professor Claude Bardox, Cloning Specialist London Jefferson, Engineer Bill Henderson, Unidentified."

"Data on Unidentified life sign."

"Insufficient data."

"Gender?"

"Male."

"Humanoid?"

"Unknown."

"What?"

"Unknown."

"Identifiable elements of the body of the intruder, both organic and inorganic?"

The computer began listing chemical and metallic elements. Finally Bill said, "Identifiable elements that are different than those found in human beings?"

While he listened, Bill ran a diagnostic on the shuttle and saw that it was fit for flight, but barely. And it was still in the shuttle bay.

Suddenly he said, "Repeat the last!" to the computer.

"Inorganic nanotechnology."

"Scope?"

"Insufficient data."

"Speculate."

"Goal: repairs to organic material."

Bill shook his head, not having a clue what that meant, but knowing that nanotechnology was mainly used in medicine, and this might not be good.

"Number of life forms on the station?"

"Four."

"You told me five before."

"Current information indicates that there are four life forms on the station."

"Location of all life forms aboard the station."

"Professor Claude Bardox is located in the laboratory storage room on Deck four, in the—"

"I know where that is. Where is London?"

"London Jefferson is on the main stairwell, ascending from deck three. Exact coordinates are—"

"What's the location of the Unknown life form?"

"Unknown life form is in the emergency stairwell, between decks two and three, ascending, exact coordinates—"

"Never mind that." A cold chill ran through Bill. "Based on the speed of both London and the unknown life form, estimate which one will reach deck one first."

"The unknown life form will arrive approximately two minutes prior to London Jefferson's arrival on deck one. At current speed, that would be exactly—"

"They're going to meet."

"One hundred and twenty-one seconds, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and nineteen..."

He raced back to the arms cabinet and out of the corner of his eye saw a clump of something that he hadn't noticed before that made him snap his head to the right. Just behind the door that had been smashed open and nearly torn from its hinges, lay what must be a body. He had seen the blood before, but somehow his mind hadn't registered it until now.

As he approached, he realized it was not exactly a body, just part of one, a torso; there were no limbs, but a head sat at the top, a bald head that he recognized. Amidst the wash of blood over her and the floor and walls surrounding her he saw circles of flesh, as if someone or something had cut her arms and legs like they were carrots.

He squatted by her side but knew instantly she was long dead. He did a cursory exam and felt his mind boggle at the massive injuries she had sustained from the waist down. Horror filled him, the desire to puke. He felt his brain emptying of thoughts, but that was dangerous. He could not deal with this now. Not now. Whatever had done this to Renata was coming; he had to warn London.

Bill returned to the weapons cabinet. He jammed a laser into each pocket of his pants, a recharger into his jacket pocket, and picked up the stun gun. Oh hell, he might as well take the last laser, because

based on what he saw here, he would need all the firepower he could get.

While he did all this he thought about sending a personal call to London. But his voice would ring out in the stairwell, as would hers if she answered, and the intruder might hear them. The last thing he wanted was that intruder knowing her whereabouts.

"Current whereabouts of London?"

"Main stairwell, approximately one flight below deck one and—"

"Location of the intruder?"

"Emergency stairwell, Deck one."

"Shit," he screamed and tore out the door and down the corridor.

Even before he reached the stairwell, he saw Jason X slam through the emergency stairwell door and begin stomping around the circular corridor, headed his way. The horror of this giant had to be disregarded.

Bill reached the main stairwell and started down, screaming, "London. London. It's Bill. Head down. He's here and he's after us. Run!" His voice echoed through the open stairwell and he hoped the sounds didn't collide in her ears into gibberish.

He met her as she was turning to descend, her eyes wild. "Go," he yelled.

Voorhees was close to the main stairs on deck one, just one flight above them. Together Bill and London raced downward, moving as fast as they were able, but Bill could hear Jason in hot pursuit, his steps twice as fast as theirs, taking the stairs two at a time, and running at a speed they could not manage.

"Stop," he told London, and had to grab her by the arm when she kept moving, her eyes blind with terror. "Take this."

He handed her a laser, and she took it in her hand, staring at it as if it were a repulsive insect, yet her fingers instantly curled around the handle.

"I'll hold him off. Get to the shuttle bay and get out of here. "

"What about Bardox?"

"Fuck him, get to safety."

"I won't go without you. You can't fight Jason X alone. He's got these nano ants that instantly repair him and—"

"London, get going. Somebody has to survive this. Do it."

Even as he spoke, Jason X was just rounding the corner of the landing directly above them. He and London both turned and looked up.

Bill had never seen anyone so massive, so powerful looking, and so persistent. He reached into his jacket pocket and the recharger fell out, but he couldn't stoop to get it now. His fingers grabbed at the remote and he handed it behind his back and said to London, "Take this. The universal code is 'free. It will open everything. Now, get out of here."

Even before he finished speaking, he fired the laser at Jason X. The beam hit the solar plexus, dead on, making the metal steam. The killer paused for a heartbeat, and then continued as if nothing had happened.

Bill backed up towards the next set of steps down, relieved that London was already gone. He couldn't start down them, because Voorhees would be on him, and he might get to London too. Bill fired the laser again, the beam glancing off Jason's arm. He turned and ran around the corridor, towards the emergency stairs, firing as he went, aiming at Jason's head, which other than his face was exposed flesh. The laser hit that creepy metallic mask and smoke burst from the red-hot metal. Bill fired again and again until Jason X turned away from the main stairs and started along the corridor in his direction. He fired again, and the laser weapon died. He pulled out the last laser gun he had, telling himself to make every shot count. At least Jason X was following him, not London. He pitched the dead laser at Voorhees just as he opened the door to the emergency stairs. He had to make sure that Jason X had no confusion in his mind as to who to follow. Bill felt no confusion about direction. He headed back up to the bridge, the best place for a standoff, he hoped.

FIFTEEN

Claude Bardox had, as always, created what he needed, seemingly like a god, out of nothing. Based on his analysis of Jason X's DNA which he'd used to form the serum, if that serum he'd prepared had not worked and he was not convinced of that—then he had an alternative, an assortment of chemical brews in his hands, ready for spider injection, which would tranquilize even the largest mammals in the universe and leave them docile. And Jason X was definitely mammalian, just like any other human being. His nano ants might be non-human. And they would surely attempt to counteract the blend of tranquilizers from the first spider "bite," but by then Bardox would have hit Jason X with the second spider, then the third. Three different mixtures, none of which used the same elemental base, so the ants could not build immunity for all three at the same time. And hopefully they would be confused enough by the three compounds that it would take some time to reverse the effects of all the drugs.

Injection would, of course, be preferable, instantaneous, but Claude knew that the chances of him getting close enough to Jason X for that were improbable. He was not insane. He understood the limitations of this project. Spiders, their application imperfect, would have to do.

He looked at the spiders, which to his mind resembled nothing more than old-fashioned darts, balanced perfectly, a sharp surgical steel tip, and a feathered tail. The tip of the spider dart would enter a pore, then that tip would spring apart creating eight little "legs" like those of a spider—hence the name—and each leg would feel around until it made contact with a blood vessel and, once it did, would wrap itself around that vessel until secure. Then the tips of the lucky legs that had found their object would pierce the vessel. And because the tips were saturated with the pharmaceuticals he'd concocted, the drugs would enter the bloodstream. Each of the three tranquilizers had been modified with a quick-action base, which meant when a spider leg penetrated the blood vessel, the tranquilizer would get to the bloodstream quickly and would move through Jason X's system

even faster than his pulsing blood moved, leapfrogging over blood cells several at a time, in effect outrunning the nano ants. The drugs should reach the heart within a minute. The tranquilizers would then circulate through the body in another minute, and by then the second spider dart would be taking effect. And once it got going, the third would be in place. It was a genius plan, developed by a genius. He chortled softly to himself.

Bardox wiped the sweat from his brow with the bloody cloth, now dry. His head ached, and his nose hurt more than he could bear at moments, especially when he looked down, and that had caused him to pause again and again to gain control over the pain before he could continue. He could barely see, his vision blurred a bit, his eyes were not fully open, but he had overcome his limitations, and was ready; like any true scientist, he rose to the occasion. A dose of a mild painkiller helped.

Bardox knew that he was not buying himself much time, but just enough to explain to Jason X exactly what it was he wanted to do. From all his readings, Claude knew that Jason had been severely mistreated from childhood, left in the hands of not just Doctor Stein but a long list of military, industrial and law enforcement personnel who had not the slightest notion of who they were dealing with, and his amazing potential. Even the scientists and so-called doctors who, rather than having the noble goal of seeing Jason X as a progenitor of a future race of an altered and superior type of human beings, simply attempted to employ him to further their own limited ends.

Claude was not like that. He had the welfare of all humanity as his concern. Jason X when mated with the best the human race had to offer would produce an improved race, one that bred out genetic defects, like missing limbs, for instance, London was the first but of course she was highly imperfect. Still, Bardox would make sure her offspring mated, and ultimately a male and a female offspring would be produced and mate, folding the DNA back again and again into itself, refining it to create a purer line—ultimately when a good female candidate had been born. Bardox would make sure that conception would take place in a sterile laboratory setting, and not the vile germ-infested body of a human female. How barbaric, he

thought. No, the most pure female being he could breed, or at least her ova, would be penetrated by the sperm of the original Jason X and that would finally be the line from which the new, improved, ultimately superior race would be born.

He envisioned genetically perfect beings that possessed strength, beauty, intelligence, and motivation, who were not distracted from their goals by pain, hunger and thirst, desire for sleep, sexual need, or the greed and obsession which seemed to drive many human beings, let alone accounted for such human foibles as conscience and values based on humanitarianism.

At that point, the other test lines would die out just as the Neanderthals had disappeared at the dawn of the birth of humanity, allowing the enhanced Cro-Magnons of the future to breed and expand and populate the universe with near indestructible beings that had none of the revolting human physical or emotional or mental needs that had hampered humanity from developing as quickly and as fully as it should have.

It infuriated him that the twenty-fourth century, with millions of years of evolution under the belt of Homo sapiens, and it was as though science had progressed at a snail's pace due to human hesitations and fears that should never have been permitted to stand in the way of the empirical. Exploration should have gone far beyond this galaxy by now, into as yet unknown galaxies, but all the pathetic sentiment after the evacuation of the original Earth had set back the course of innovation for centuries.

Now, thanks to the creativity and imagination of Professor Claude Bardox, leader par excellence, all that would change. Human beings would finally reach their potential, and future generations would have him to thank although, he managed to chuckle, he fully expected that this new breed he planned to cultivate would not be restricted by antiquated attitudes that espoused gratitude, generosity, manners, and the like as necessary for human interaction. No, humanity would be free, completely free to pursue its desires and go right to its goals. The end would indeed justify the means.

Bardox left the lab storage room in an upbeat mood, the three spider darts clutched in his fleshy hand, thinking that soon, if conditions proved appropriate, he might even use Jason X's DNA to grow himself a new arm, a superior limb which his body would surely not reject.

Cheered by this, he headed around the circular corridor to the emergency stairwell that would take him up to deck one and the bridge and at the same time help him avoid London and her inappropriate interference. There he could ascertain where on this station he might find Jason X. And he wanted to find Jason X soon.

Slowly, throbbing head hardly dampening his enthusiasm, he began climbing the three hundred and twenty steps.

London had managed to get down another flight of stairs to deck three before she heard a noise and looked up to see Bill racing around the circular corridor on deck two, Jason X on his heels. They both crashed through the door to the emergency stairwell. Instinctively, London knew that Bill would lead him up, back to the bridge, away from her so that she could make her escape.

She paused for a moment. She trembled with fear; sweat coated her face and palms, as she gripped the railing, trying to catch her breath. Suddenly she heard a noise below and looked over the railing. There was Bardox below, on deck four, rounding the corridor, heading for the emergency stairs door.

"Bardox," she called, her voice bouncing around the stairwell. He looked up and around until finally he saw her. "Don't go in there," she screamed, waving her arms, even as he opened the door and entered the emergency stairs, the door clanking shut behind him.

"Idiot. Why don't you listen? Do you have a death wish?" But of course he was no longer within hearing range.

What to do? Should she continue on down to the shuttle as Bill had told her—surely that made the most sense? But then she would be leaving both Bill and Bardox to face Jason X alone. She didn't kid herself that she had any type of defensive moves to offer that would

help. And there would surely be no time for anyone to appreciate sympathetic support. But it always got down to the same thing for London: she could not abandon her crew, her friends; well, at least Bill was her friend. What kind of human being would she be to run out on them, leaving them to the fate of this madman?

Maybe there was nothing she could contribute in the way of battle strategies, but she had to stay and help in whatever feeble manner she could. If she didn't, what would be the point of saving herself? She could never face herself again, and that was no life at all.

With a heavy heart, London walked around the circular corridor to the emergency stairs and opened the door, knowing it would take Bardox time to climb to deck three. She stepped inside and closed the door, listening to him shuffle up from below, trying to tune her ear to what was happening above, but no sounds came down the stairwell. Which meant that Bill and Jason X were back up on deck one, where Bill was likely holding off the beast-from-hell as best he could on the bridge. She felt she had to get up there to help him. But by now he might have led Jason X back to the main stairwell, or somewhere else.

London started down and met Bardox on the landing between decks three and four. The professor looked up at her through the slits of his swollen eyes.

"Why did you disappear?" she asked, realizing how stupid it was to ask him anything. He wouldn't have any kind of answer that made sense. And it didn't matter anyway. What mattered now was getting him to safety, and then helping Bill.

She took his arm and began to turn him, to go back down, but his body grew tense and he shook her off. "Miss Jefferson, I intend to go to the bridge and use the computer to locate the whereabouts of Jason X."

"He's on the bridge. Why do you want to find him? He'll kill you."

Bardox smiled the smile of the insane. He waved a hand in front of her face and in it he held three darts. She had seen these before, spider darts, used for lethal purposes in military operations, but sometimes used on animals or people who could not be dealt with up close but who needed to be inoculated, anesthetized, tranquilized or

subjected to an invasive procedure. She remembered seeing the darts listed with the lab supplies, and figured it was just another waste of money on something they had no use for.

"And what do you think you'll accomplish with those?" she asked Bardox, already knowing that he had something in mind for Jason X.

"I've created a Jason X-specific tranquilizer, in fact, three different ones."

London closed her eyes and shook her head in exasperation. "That's ridiculous. He can't be tranquilized. The serum didn't work."

"You don't know that for a—"

"I saw him in action not ten minutes ago. He almost killed me. Trust me, the serum did not work. If Bill hadn't lured him to the bridge, I'd probably be dead."

"So he's up there too." Bardox grinned.

"Enough of this, if you're too stupid or too crazy to help yourself, I'll just have to do it for you." London grabbed his arm firmly and turned him around so he was facing the steps leading down, and then squeezed past him on the narrow stairwell to get to one step below him, so she could pull him down behind her. She'd get him on that shuttle damn it, and tie him up so he didn't escape with it himself, since he seemed capable of flying one. Then she'd go back up to the bridge and help Bill.

Suddenly a piercing pain hit her between the shoulder blades. She turned and saw that Bardox was holding only two spider darts. Even if she hadn't seen that, and even before her free hand began to feel along the middle of her upper back to locate the pain, she knew from what was happening inside her that the tranquilizing chemicals were racing through her system towards her heart.

Her body suddenly felt weak, limp to the point where her limbs might have been made of soft clay. Her vision blurred slightly, then sharpened, and thoughts seemed to just drift away. By the time she felt herself falling backwards, it was too late to react quickly. Her movements were sluggish as she flailed, her hand missing the railing that would have kept her from toppling down the steps.

As she fell, she thought in her bliss-like mental state that the stairs hitting her upper back, her hips, her arms, her head, none of these

assaults hurt, and wasn't that strange? Vaguely she wondered what drugs he had used, knowing even as those thoughts drifted away that they were inappropriate thoughts; she should have been worried about her safety, about Bill's safety, about Bardox's. About Jason X...

When she finally landed, she was on her back, arms and legs stretched out, staring up at Bardox, who was saying, "How unfortunate that I needed to waste one spider on you, but I cannot allow you to hamper my program. My work is far too important. I suggest you rest there until you are needed for your role in my plan."

She had no idea what he meant. Dazed, she watched him turn and begin climbing the steps at a slow but steady pace, enough to put her to sleep.

Bill reached the bridge and leapt through the torn door. His first stop was near Renata's body. He'd seen one of her bloody hands, still gripping a laser. He yelled at the computer, "Location of London?"

"Emergency stairwell, just below deck three, exact—"

"What? Why in hell is she in that stairwell?" He tried to snatch the laser gun away from fingers where rigor mortis had set in. In the end he simply stomped his heel down onto her hand and broke her locked fingers to get the gun, which seemed to be about half full.

Jason X was coming through the emergency exit when Bill fired at the mask. Not the easiest target, but he'd already fired at Jason X's body and noticed the lack of effectiveness. The suit of armor he wore protected most of his body, although the laser got through as well. At least with the face there were places of exposed fleshy vulnerability, like the eyes, the nostrils, a few small holes in the mask. But if the angle was right, he had most of the back of the head as a target.

The laser blast stopped Jason for about ten seconds. He stood perfectly still, metal steaming, smoke cascading from all the openings of the face mask, the eyes through the holes charred. But something—the nanotechnology, what London called "nano ants"—was at work inside him, busy repairing him faster than Bill could shoot again. If he could keep shooting, hitting the fleshy parts, Jason

X would be stunned for ten seconds consecutively until the repair mechanism inside him did its job. But a charged laser would permit no more than six such blasts, and one minute of Jason X out of commission wouldn't help much. Still, it beat the hell out of fighting him hand to hand; Bill suspected he'd lose such a battle.

Bill had another full laser gun, the stun gun, and no recharger. He saw one across the room, broken in two. Even if he had one in working order, it would take a good five minutes to recharge a laser gun. He had to find another weapon.

He fired again, watching the flesh repair before his eyes, the Ants faster this time. They learn from what they do, he thought, amazed at this technology that acted like the most sophisticated computer to the tenth power. He racked his brain, trying to think of how that information could help him.

As Jason X recovered again, he took a giant step further into the room, the hand that grasped that deadly blood-streaked knife raised high above his head. Bill shot him in the face, frantically searching the bridge for something, anything that would come in handy.

Suddenly, in a flash of enlightenment he remembered that deck one could be separated and ejected from the station. This was a precautionary measure, available to the crew in the event of an emergency that compromised the bridge. It allowed the crew not on the bridge to still reach the shuttle bay.

It would take some finagling to set this in motion, but what else was there to try? The bridge would float in space, as would the station, separately, until help arrived, if help arrived. If only that help could combat the threat of Jason X, he thought.

He'd have to rig a short timer, if he could—

Jason X moved and Bill blasted him in the face again, this shot going directly into an eyehole of the mask and searing the right eye, which smoked as if it were afire. Only two shots left in Renata's laser. If he could rig a timer, and keep Jason X at bay, he could make it to deck two when deck one separated. Then he just might get down to the shuttle and be able to take off with London. But that was a long shot. A dream.

While he programmed the computer he said, "Location of London?"

"Emergency stairwell, just below deck three at—"

"That can't be! She hasn't moved!"

"Affirmative."

What the fuck? Jason X was with him. What could have happened?

Bill told the computer, "Engineer Bill Lawrence, ordering a deck one disconnection, ID # 50437L." While he spoke, he pressed his hand onto the scan plate on the main console, just in case the computer needed verification—this would save time.

He saw the light on the board go from red to green and he also saw Jason X step towards him again, fighting the injury, the nano ants repairing at twice the speed of his first shot.

Just to stagger it, he fired the stun gun, same place, aiming for the eye. It didn't stun Jason X and he switched to the second laser, shooting two beams, one into each eye hole. He needed time. Now!

"Identity, Engineer Bill Lawrence. Proceed with deck one disconnection."

"Deck one disconnection requires authorization by two senior crew members."

Damn. London was a senior member. He'd have to get her up here, but how? "London. London, come in!"

No response.

Jason X fought the laser injury and staggered further towards the control panels, weapon raised, a hand reaching out to grab Bill, the murderous glint in his eyes unnerving. Bill had one laser shot left in one gun and he fired it, aiming for the nostril, but he wasn't a real marksman and was off by two inches. "Shit!" he yelled, throwing the now empty gun at Jason X's head. The monster ducked and lunged.

Bill felt himself picked up bodily and hurled across the room. He slammed into the laser cabinet with his right shoulder, instantly and painfully dislocating it. If only he had a couple of those nano ants—

Jason X was on him, that huge knife slamming down towards his head and Bill rolled to the right. The knife hit the floor and Jason X raised it again, bringing it down where he now lay, and Bill went

further to the right. Shit, if he could reach the door, he could try to outrun the bastard!

The knife was coming down and Bill feigned right then rolled left, but Jason X anticipated him and the blade sliced deep into his thigh. Bill howled, grasping at his leg with his one good hand to stem the tide of the blood flow, as he struggled to roll further away from the relentless deadly blade.

Suddenly Jason X stood over him; legs apart, one on each side of Bill's body, and Bill knew he could not escape, not with those injuries. A flash thought of kicking him in the balls crossed his mind but with one good leg that would be hard. Even while he was thinking it wouldn't work he was putting the plan into action. The knife moved too fast to see and came down on the sole of the boot of his raised foot, splitting it and the foot inside lengthwise from toes to heel, shattering bone. Bill screamed and nearly fainted from the pain.

Then, inexplicably, Jason X stopped. He turned, and as he did so, Bill saw Bardox on the other side of the room.

"Run," Bill yelled, forgetting for a moment how much he hated Bardox.

But the professor merely smiled, or at least Bill thought that was a smile across his broken face. His nose was smashed, his eyes bloody and bruised.

"Get out of here, he'll kill you," Bill warned through his own agony.

"Please do not shout, Mr Lawrence. I am perfectly capable of hearing you, and I have no intention of leaving. I came here to hold a discourse with Jason X."

"What? Are you insane?"

"Not insane, protected." Bardox held up what Bill knew to be a spider dart. "Tranquilizer," Bardox said, and Bill instantly knew what was going on. Somehow Bardox had manufactured something that worked, stuck it on the end of the dart and got it into Jason's body. He saw the tail of the dart wobbling at the back of Jason X's skull where the flesh was exposed.

While Bill ripped his shirt and tied a tourniquet around his thigh, and bent painfully to tie another around the ankle of his damaged

foot, he said, "He's got something called nano ants in him. They'll overcome the tranquilizer."

"I'm aware of that, Mr Lawrence. I've made provisions."

Bill tried to pull his dislocated shoulder back into place. A small cry escaped his lips as the ball returned to the socket. Some relief flooded him. "Good," he gasped. "You're a senior member of the crew." Bill panted. "Give the computer your password and hand scan and we can disconnect deck number one and send this sucker out into space.' The absence of joint pain allowed him to feel his other injuries. They were not good. Without treatment he could die quickly from blood loss, or infection from that knife. "We can get out of here and down to deck two, then get to the shuttle. London's still on the station and—"

"Why would I want to do any of that?"

Bill stopped for a moment and through his pain stared at Bardox as if he didn't understand what he'd just heard.

"Mr Lawrence, I brought Jason X here to help him, not to harm him."

Bill couldn't believe his ears. Bardox wasn't just an eccentric asshole; he was out and out crazy. And just as Bill had known, every problem, every emergency could be traced to this crazy man.

"Alright," he said, racking his brain trying to think of a way to get deck one disconnected and leave Bardox on it with Jason X, "just how the hell do you expect to help' this killer? The same way you helped my sister? You fucking asshole—"

Bardox ignored Bill. His eyes locked onto Jason X as if he was God and this was Bardox's first meeting with the Almighty.

"What a wondrously perfect being you are," he exclaimed, moving closer to Jason X.

Even as he did so, Bill started pulling himself across the floor to the control panel, stopping en route to grab Renata's other severed hand, the one still intact. If he could trick the computer using his universal code and her hand print, maybe he could disconnect deck one. Then, if he could somehow get through that emergency door and bar it from the inside of the stairwell, then make his way down towards the shuttle... If London was still in the emergency stairwell,

he'd run into her and see why she was there, and why she'd taken so long, and she could help him. At least he knew that the computer wouldn't have identified her whereabouts if she were dead.

Maybe, just maybe, they could survive this.

"I've plans for you," Bardox was saying.

Bill's arm, while back in place, was sore as hell, and it wasn't easy dragging himself along. One leg was useless and the foot of the other just as useless, so right now he effectively had no legs. Bardox was occupied and seemingly didn't give a shit what Bill was doing. Jason X, though, followed Bill with his eyes, sending a chill through the wounded body of the engineer.

"I understand just how badly you've been treated," Bardox was saying. "Never appreciated for your strength, your endurance, your invulnerability."

Jason X's eyes shifted back to Bardox.

"You, of all people, should be producing children, sons and daughters who can carry your legacy into the future, and yet you've been denied this option. Until now."

Bill had reached the console and hauled himself into a chair because he could not stand. He placed Renata's severed hand onto the screen and typed in the universal code "FREE". Rather than speak and alert Bardox, he spent the extra time to type in the deck one disconnect order again, by authorization of Renata Henderson, the second senior crew member.

When he heard the warning beep ringing through the bridge, Bill slid down from the chair to the floor. Bardox looked around him, aware of the sound, not quite sure what it indicated as Bill pulled himself as fast as his arms could to the emergency exit doorway.

Whatever Bardox had slammed Jason X with was working. At least the lunatic had done something right. It was a damned shame he had to disconnect deck one, not because of Bardox, but because he and London would be on a station with little computer help. Everything the computer ran, which was everything on the station, would shift to emergency status, bare minimum. Still, they could get to the shuttle.

Bill slid his legs through the exit doorway. This door too was destroyed so he didn't even bother to close it. He still had to haul himself down the short corridor to the stairwell. That was a door he wanted locked but not as much as the door on deck two that would seal the emergency stairwell on the station away from the emergency stairwell of deck one, protecting it when it disconnected. The computer would take care of the rest, sealing off the station, but the emergency stairwell had to be locked manually, since it was the only means of escaping a deck one disconnection.

If he hadn't given London his remote. How he'd do it manually he didn't know because he couldn't stand, which meant he couldn't reach the controls.

He'd solve problems when he came to them, because otherwise he'd waste energy he needed just to move. For now, it was enough that he had had, he hoped, a last look at both Bardox and Jason X.

The two had stood but a foot apart, Bardox looking up into that metal-masked face with pure idolatry shining in his blackened eyes. One of Jason X's gloved hands held the most deadly knife in the universe; the other was balled into a fist.

As Bill started sliding down the steps, he prayed that both of these demented creatures would keep "talking" for the next ten minutes, long enough for him to get down to deck two and seal off the station.

Claude Bardox was enraptured with Jason X. For one of the few times in his life, he was nearly speechless. This man, no, this being, held the secrets of the universe within him, the mystery that was the key to survival of the fittest.

"I'm going to ensure that you, Jason X, are given the praise you deserve. Everyone will know that you are about to father an entirely new branch of *Homo sapiens*, one which will replace this pathetic line that has struggled far too long, unable to breed out its imperfections. Now, though, all that will change. You will be the source of renewal."

Jason X's eyes shone. Surely he was sharing Claude's vision.

Claude marveled at how the universe often brought together the exact components needed to ensure change. The situation could not be better.

He walked to the control panel. He placed the second spider dart onto the panel to key in a request to chart a course from the station to Earth II. He would need to stop en route, and wanted to find a destination planet that was privately owned, which would ensure fewer questions. His objective was to get back to Earth II as quickly and surreptitiously as possible. Once there, Jason X would be taken to his laboratory and the process of cloning through insemination could begin.

"What is that incessant beeping?" he demanded of the computer; the sound increased the headache that dogged him.

"Deck number one disconnection eminent."

"What? By whose authority?"

"Engineer Bill Lawrence and Head of Security Renata Henderson."

"That's impossible, cancel that order."

"By whose authority?"

"By mine. Professor Claude Bardox."

"The termination of Deck number one disconnection order requires authorization of two senior crew members and—"

"Alright," he snapped. "How long until disconnection?"

"Approximately ten minutes."

"Whereabouts of London Jefferson?"

"Emergency stairwell, level three, exact coordinates—"

"Good." He wanted to take London with him. After all, she would be the first mother of his intention, albeit not the ultimate.

He picked up the second spider dart and said to Jason X, "Come along, then. We have work to do."

The giant turned and followed Bardox like a puppy, out the main door, around the corridor, and to the elevator beside the main stairwell. They waited the minute necessary for the elevator to make its way up from Level #3 to Level #1 and when it did and the doors opened, what was left of the elevator box itself was nothing more than a partial floor to stand on. The ceiling was gone, the walls

smashed in. Bardox shook his head. If only they would have listened to him!

He entered the elevator first then said to Jason Voorhees, "Come."

Jason X stepped into the elevator facing the rear, but it was a short way down and Bardox didn't bother redirecting him to face front. "Level #3," he said, and the elevator, the worse for wear, jerked downward. Even on that short ride, Bardox could not really ignore the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, being in a confined space with Jason X felt like a trap. The man exuded a power and violence, even tranquilized, which left Claude deciding that he must reprogram himself so that he did not react to his subject in such a terrified manner. It would not breed trust, not at all. But those thoughts did not alter his response.

The second they reached deck three and the smashed elevator door opened, Bardox exited, said to Jason X, "Follow me." But Claude had to admit to himself that it was more like ordering Jason, for there seemed to be no personality coming from him, no will to speak of. The tranquilizer was strong, that he admitted to himself. Still, sedated subjects were themselves. Perhaps Voorhees was reticent to reveal his personality. After all, anyone who had undergone the trauma he had would surely hold back. Claude knew he must make a special effort to form a connection. Relationships were not his strong suit but he had read extensively on human interactions and understood the concepts of psychology well enough that he could manage this, with time. After all, he would need to gain Jason X's trust for the experiment to be completely successful.

They walked around the circular corridor towards the emergency stairwell, Claude feeling exhaustion setting in. His face hurt; the painkiller had worn off. If only he'd found one of the time-released opiates, but no, all that was in the storage cabinet, a refined derivative of acetylsalicylic acid, nothing more.

He pushed open the door to the emergency stairwell. London lay on the landing at the bottom of the next flight of stairs down, just as she had when he left her. He held the door for Jason X, who entered and stopped, staring down at the comatose woman. Claude idly wondered if he had any sexual feelings or if he had, like Bardox

himself, evolved beyond all that messiness. No matter, inseminations that took place in future would be under more strict scientific controls, leaving the messiness of female birthing entirely out of the picture. The results would be the same, the process far easier. Although it had been outlawed, human eggs could be fertilized in a Petri dish and the embryo then the fetus grown in an incubator to "birth." Once the powers-that-be on Earth II saw Jason X and understood Bardox's plan, they would rescind the archaic laws to enable his research to proceed in a more organic fashion. And if they did not, he would simply continue his work surreptitiously.

Bardox had thought they could walk down to deck four to the circular corridor then catch the elevator down to the shuttle bay, but he was just not up to it. "Alright, Jason X, go down there and pick her up, then we'll head back to the main elevator and down to the shuttle bay."

"Like hell you will," a voice from behind shouted.

Bardox turned to see Bill, face pale, arm wrapped around the railing to hold himself upright, a laser or some other gun in one hand, a stun gun in the other. His body was a mess. Blood leaked from a leg wound tied off with a tourniquet and a makeshift bandage. His split boot was so bloody Bardox could not really see the injury. The wall and the metal steps behind him were smeared with blood.

Jason X continued down the steps towards London.

Bardox yelled, "No," as Bill fired a blast from the stun gun at the back of Jason X's head. The giant stumbled forward, down a few steps, but regained his balance. When he started down again, Bill blasted him again.

"Stop it, I demand you stop this at once," Bardox said.

Bill realized there were no paralyzing effects and if there were, they weren't lasting even two seconds.

"Jason, forget her," Bardox said.

Bill hoped this would bring him to a halt because Jason X seemed to be under Bardox's command. The giant turned slowly, like a metalically reinforced Frankenstein monster, and Bardox pointed at Bill.

"Kill him."

Jason X turned fully and started back up the steps. From the front, not as much of his body was exposed, and Bill aimed the stun gun between his thigh and kneecap, hoping to trick the nano ants. The blast only caused him to lurch forward.

"Call him off or I'll shoot you," he told Bardox.

"With a stun gun? Oh please," Bardox said.

"With a laser," Bill said, lifting that weapon.

Jason X had already reached the landing. Bill fired again, and the stun gun was obviously short on juice. He switched to the laser, aiming for the face, knowing even as he shot that the nano ants were onto the laser, onto the face as a target, onto how to repair Jason X against any of the weapons they had on the station. Not that Bill had more.

"Call him off," Bill shouted, pushing himself back up a couple of steps as Jason started up again. If he could only stand then he could run. But he could not stand. Here, he was more a victim than anywhere else on the station. Still, he fired at Jason X and then aimed the last of the rounds at Bardox.

"Call him off or I kill you."

Bardox understood the reality of the threat. If he died, Jason X might just float around the universe until the end of time, for who would look for him? Who would look after him? Who would recognize his potential?

"Jason, stop. Do not harm this man."

But Voorhees did not stop. His feet moved sluggishly but relentlessly up the steps.

"Stop it, this instant," Bardox ordered, and nothing changed.

Bill fired the remaining shots of the stun gun at Bardox who cried out, and the last of the laser shots at Jason X, with no noticeable effect on the latter. Bill had reached a landing and slid his body back towards the next set of steps but there was no chance he would get even as far as the first.

Jason X grabbed the spliced foot. As Bill howled in pain, struggling despite the impossibility of kicking with his damaged leg, Jason lifted him by wounded foot, high into the air, and bounced him down onto the metal landing crown first.

Bill screamed, and then suddenly his voice stopped making sounds. His neck broke on impact; he heard the crunch at the back, felt the lightning pain, and then his body, mercifully, from the neck down stopped feeling anything at all. His head, though, made sounds each time it hit the metal landing, again and again, first a thunk, and soon, a softer, duller bonk. Bill became an observer, aware that his shattered skull struck metal, spilling blood and grey matter on to the floor and ceiling and walls, all within his vision. The sounds had turned to a squish.

Bardox had watched all this in a horrified state of painful paralysis. The stun gun had sent a ripple of sharp shock through his body. He crumpled and fell onto the landing where he stood, unable to do anything but watch Jason x bouncing Mr Lawrence's head as if he were a child's yo-yo.

Apparently Claude no longer controlled Jason X. That was fine, he assured himself, barely able to cope with the violence he had witnessed. He reminded himself that he still had one spider left. The instant that the paralysis wore off—and he could already feel pins and needles in his hands and feet—he would be able to re-tranquilize Jason X.

He could try to shoot the spider from there, but likely he would miss, not being particularly athletic. No, he would need to get closer, do what he had done before, and jam it into the flesh to give the drugs the maximum opportunity to work quickly and efficiently. The closer he could place it to the heart, so much the better.

As he regained the use of his throbbing arms and legs, and more slowly his torso and neck, he lifted his fleshy hand with great effort and placed the dart into his shirt pocket, the tip positioned upward for safety. Then he hauled himself up the steps gripping the handrail hard.

Jason X heard him and turned, still grasping the dead body of Bill Lawrence by the macabre, shredded foot. The sight of Bill's head was like the heads of rodents he had dissected as a boy, rodents that had been in a collision. It upset him. The damage created by the severity of the blows, the blood and the brains splattered everywhere, and Bill's face... The others Jason X had killed were different. Claude had

not himself witnessed the actual deaths of Emery, of Felicity, and he had been unconscious in the lab when Bella Morte and Akako were killed. Yes, he had seen the after effects, but watching the grisly process of deconstruction as Jason X single-minded pursued his goal with nothing, absolutely nothing to interfere, nothing to temper his fury... It was... He could not comprehend it.

But he must not think of that now. He must get up there and imbed the spider dart into Jason X's flesh and see that he was well sedated. After that, his next stop would be the storage room—he would certainly need more spiders.

Thoughts of a concrete plan allowed common sense to resurrect itself and Bardox swallowed his brewing hysteria.

"You mustn't worry about all this..." Claude's mouth was dry, his words slurring from the stun gun. He tried to sound calm. He paused on the step to wave his hand in a general fashion to indicate everything, "...this mess. We have a higher purpose. That's all that matters. Now, come here. Please." He had no idea why he regressed to using the word "Please," which he had not really used since childhood, and it left a rather uncomfortable taste in his mouth, yet somehow he felt the need to move away from commands. Perhaps it was the look in Jason X's eyes, eyes that seemed to have changed from a pale, innocuous blue, to something resembling the coldness of agates. Yet, perhaps that was only the dimmer lighting in the stairwell.

Jason began his descent, but not with the softness of step and movement that Bardox would have liked to see. Still, he held the dead body of Bill Lawrence, dangling it like a favorite gruesome doll, dragging it behind so the head bumped down each metal step, smearing blood in its wake. Every instinct in Bardox told him to run, but his brain, fortunately, took control, as it always had, and he held his ground, although he could feel his body trembling.

"Yes, that's right, come closer. We must make sure you are comfortable and relaxed."

Jason X came down, and down and down, until finally he was but two steps above Bardox, who could not help but stare at the head of Bill Lawrence.

"You can stop there," Bardox said.

But Jason X kept coming.

"Stop, I tell you stop."

Jason X was on the step above. His body banged into Bardox's, knocking the professor down several steps. Bardox caught himself before falling, hanging onto the railing, his body wobbling back and forth, bending down and up as he struggled for balance.

Suddenly something bit into his chin. "Oh no," he cried, knowing it was the spider. He could already feel the legs stretching out from the point.

He let go of the rail to yank the spider from his flesh but it was too late. The point came out, the legs of the spider remained embedded, searching for blood vessels to encircle and pierce.

Claude looked up at Jason X with horror. The super-being, the would-be savior of mankind, Claude's ticket to fame and fortune bore down on him like an out-of-control machine that could not be stopped by anything human beings had yet fashioned. Neither weapons nor tenderness, neither the head nor the heart would sway Jason X.

"Let me explain it to you further—" Bardox began. But it was too late for that, if there ever had been a time when talk would have made a difference. And now it seemed to Claude that there never would have been such a time. Understanding dawned in the last moments of his existence.

Behind him he heard a groan. Jason X grabbed his fleshy arm. Bardox howled in pain as Jason X ripped the arm away by the shoulder joint. Bardox surprised himself. Instead of yelling out to London, "Help me!" he screamed at her "Save yourself."

London opened her eyes slowly and groaned. When she heard Bardox's voice, she forced herself to sit up, dizzy all the way, suddenly aware of aches and pains shooting through her body. She began to remember the fall down the steps but screams brought her fully conscious fast.

She stared in horror as Jason X towered above Bardox. And there, behind him, Bill's body—and there was no way he wasn't dead—lying on, almost folded down the stairs, most of the top of his head gone. She shrieked.

Bardox said again, "Get off the station, save yourself."

Blood spurted from the artery in his arm and he had no hand to try to stem the flow. Everywhere she looked she saw blood. Suddenly Jason X pulled his arm back. The crude, sharp knife he held, that god-awful knife, came forward so fast it whistled through the air. In the blink of an eye, the tip protruded through Bardox's back.

London pulled herself up by the railing, legs weak, and body sore as if she had been beaten. Her brain felt mushy, her thoughts still confused, but one thought was crystal clear—she had to get out of there.

She turned and stumbled down the steps as fast as her shaky legs could carry her.

As Claude weakened, he could not understand it. "Why?" he asked Jason X, looking up at him like a child trying to understand what precipitated a spanking. But Claude had not been spanked, he had been stabbed, and the wound was lethal.

By way of an answer, Jason X opened his hand and grabbed Claude's face. And squeezed, so fast and so hard that Claude heard his skull and facial bones snap. Jason's fingers fell into Claude's skin, pushing muscle to the surface in an arc of blood. Pain seared through his head as Voorhees let go, skin sticking to the killer. Claude's chest felt weak, and he could see a liquid pool at his feet that he knew was his own blood.

I'm dying, he thought, listening to himself screaming, and I still don't know why.

Through his fading vision he stared at that face he had adored, not really comprehending anything more than that this was indeed the most advanced life-form in the universe. But wasn't it unfortunate that all he could do was kill?

SIXTEEN

Terrified, London ran for her life. Her body's pains dimmed compared to the mental agony of the images of what she had just witnessed, and that made her feet move so fast she had to hold onto the railing for support or she would have missed steps, tumbled down, and injured herself more. Already her knee was swollen and tender and if she damaged anything more she might just as well sit here and wait for Jason X to come and kill her, and she had no intention of doing that.

She reached deck two gasping, and in a moment of spontaneity she bashed through the stairwell door and onto the circular corridor. This route was no faster than the emergency stairwell, but the screams from there, and the feeling of claustrophobia, left it the least attractive stairs to descend.

"Warning. deck one disconnection imminent."

Someone ordered a disconnection, she thought as she raced around the corridor, knowing what that would mean to computer functions on the station. She reached the main stairs without hearing Jason X coming through the emergency door. Maybe she'd tricked him. She couldn't allow herself to believe that. More likely he was headed to deck four, where she was headed, but via the emergency stairs.

The elevator was near the main stairwell, but she didn't want to be trapped in it. Instead, she gripped the railing and pulled herself down the steps. A metal door crashed closed, reverberating around the open stairwell, and she knew that Jason X was in the circular corridor, somewhere. Apparently he was finished with Bardox.

She pushed herself harder, stumbling down the steps at a pace that would surely have propelled her to her death if she wasn't holding onto that rail.

Deck four was coming up. Just a few more steps, she thought. She could hear Jason X behind her on the main stairwell. Close, too close.

Finally, at deck four she ran down the short corridor to the elevator that would take her to the doughnut hole, to freedom. She slammed on the button at a full run. "Come on, come on. Computer, bring up this elevator."

"Elevator is out of service."

"Reinstitute service, dammit, by order of London Jefferson, cloning specialist, code three, seven, eight, four, nine, J."

She backpedaled to the crook in the corridor and saw Jason X start down the hallway, his blood-streaked knife raised above his head in anticipation of a new victim: the last living person on the station. She knew if he brought that knife down on her she would be sliced in half. And she was trapped in a dead end, nowhere but the elevator to go.

Finally the elevator pinged, and the doors opened agonizingly slowly. Even before they were fully open, she was inside, bashing the button to close them. Jason X rounded the crook and started running. Now he was close enough that she could ignore the metallic armor, the bulging muscles, the glinting mask, and the terrifying knife. Close enough that she could stare into his inhuman eyes.

As the door closed he brought the knife down hard and it slashed right through the metal. London jumped back, hitting the back wall of the elevator. If she hadn't she would have been dead.

As the elevator descended, the knife was withdrawn. Tears of terror leaked from her eyes and her body trembled uncontrollably. My God, she thought, her body shaking out of control, can I hope to escape? I'm the only one left. That thought brought more tears to her eyes but she used her shirt sleeve to wipe them away angrily. "Damn him!" she thought. Jason X had destroyed everyone on the station, everyone she worked with, and some of them were friends she loved. One was Andre. Suddenly, she remembered that she would be seeing Andre's remains and she had to steel herself for that.

The three minutes felt like a lifetime. When she reached bottom, she looked around the corridor for something, anything she could use to prop the vator door open. She didn't want it to rise, and she also wanted to make sure that it would be right there if she needed it. She couldn't find anything out in the hallway and didn't want to

waste time searching the bay. In her pocket she felt the remote that Bill had given her and used that. Bill, the thought of him raced through her mind as she raced along the short corridor to the shuttle bay, prepared for another grisly sight, bracing herself.

The bay was empty of all but the shuttle moored to the docking pad. The power source was humming away, as if someone had planned on using the shuttle. Maybe Helmet was still alive. She couldn't think about that now.

The glass room had disappeared, all the equipment, the suits, everything. Including Andre's body, and she was grateful she wouldn't have to see him.

Along the wall by the bay's exit into space she needed to open and close the door. There was no way she could press the open button and get to the shuttle in time without being sucked out the space door. She had to go back and get that remote control.

She opened the door to the corridor and took only half a second to scan both directions, then made a dash for the elevator. Once she had the remote in her hands, she raced back to the door to the shuttle bay—and saw Jason X racing round the corridor from the other side, making his way towards it too.

London's heart hit her throat as she pushed for that door, getting to it, slamming it close in his face, not even pausing even when she heard the knife hit the metal.

The shuttle ramp was down and she ran up it, hearing the corridor door ripped away behind her, not daring to turn around.

Inside, London hit the button to close the shuttle door and at the same time used the remote to open the space door. She hoped there would be enough of a delay before the space door opened; there should have been, if she remembered correctly. And she hoped that delay would be enough time for the shuttle door to close, otherwise, she'd be sucked out of the shuttle, out of the bay, and into space. Without a suit, she had no hope of survival.

She sat at the controls, firing up the power with one hand, which didn't seem to fire up very high, and using the remote to press the "OPEN" button again, although the high-pitched beeps let her know the opening was in progress.

"Deck number one disconnection in sixty seconds."

That door had better open. Power on what was left of G7 would soon be minimal.

All the while the shuttle ramp lifted, agonizingly slowly. She jumped up and peered out. Jason X had clawed his way through the corridor door. He stomped into the room, zeroing in on the shuttle. Through the crack remaining as the ramp almost reached the top of the shuttle, she watched him leap towards her. She jumped back and screamed. He caught hold of the upper edge of the ramp, his fingers clinging around the two-inch opening, his body weight increasing that gap by four inches.

London frantically searched the cockpit for something to use as a weapon. There was nothing, just the remote she held in her hand. She used that to bash at the steel-covered fingers, with no noticeable effect.

The door to space would open any second, but would it open in time to save her or to extinguish her?

Jason X held on, using brute strength to pull the door down by a further inch.

London hit the "DISENGAGE" button, unlocking the shuttle from its moorings. Suddenly she heard a sound, the shuttle bay door about to open. Rather than wait for the vortex to pull the shuttle out, she propelled the craft upward, letting the vessel bang into the bay's ceiling. She jammed the navigation stick left, then right, back and forwards. The shuttle jerked upward again, cut left, then right and finally spun in a circle.

Jason X lost his grip with one hand as he was lifted off the floor and shaken. The shuttle ramp began to close again, recapturing the inches it had lost, and finally slammed shut, his fingers still inside.

Could that be? Surely those fingers should have snapped off, she thought. Were they damaging the seal and the shuttle would allow the airlessness of space to penetrate and suck her out in a thin line?

The monitor showed the shuttle bay door opening. She heard a *WHUMP*. The fingers were sucked outside.

London wasted not a second. She shoved the navigational stick into the forward position and the shuttle lifted and moved towards

the opening doorway and the darkness of space beyond.

She checked the image monitor and scanned behind her, to see if Jason x was still there. But with the door opening, he had to have been sucked into space already. The monitor didn't seem to be working anyway. The shuttle was damaged—she'd seen that when she entered—and God knew what else wasn't working. Without a space suit she had to pray that the environmental controls within the shuttle held.

The shuttle moved slowly. She had cranked the power to maximum, but apparently this was damaged as well.

A horrible thought occurred to her: Jason X might be clinging to the shuttle! He was human and shouldn't be able to withstand airlessness. But, on the other hand, Bardox had managed to get him from Planet #666 to the station. And those nano ants probably countered space.

Terrified, she tried to do an exterior scan of the shuttle, but again, that equipment failed. And every program she ran depleted the power just a bit more. She needed everything she had to get out of there.

Finally, miraculously, the shuttle cleared the station and floated into blackness.

Suddenly she heard a loud boom. That could only be one thing: deck one separating from the rest of the station.

London could not stand the suspense. If Jason X were clinging to the shuttle, he would make a move, and try to tear it open, killing her in the process. She had to know.

She went to the small window and peered through it. She could see nothing but blackness with pinpoints of starlight. While she looked, she reached to the controls and pushed the navigational stick to the far right, forcing the shuttle to turn three hundred and sixty degrees at its slow speed.

All around her was dark space, lit only by distant stars, and the occasional uninhabitable planet. She watched the black Planet #666 pass through her field of vision, then more space. Finally the shuttle turned so that she could see the space station's shuttle bay, just behind.

There, in the doorway, was a sight that made her heart nearly stop. Jason X clung to the doorframe, somehow withstanding the vortex that should have flattened him and sent him streaming out into darkness. She was so close to that doorway. Even as he fought to stay inside, he looked as if he was about to leap through space to land on the shuttle. No, that could not be, no one could do that, she hoped. He couldn't reach the shuttle, could he?

No, don't do it, she thought. Don't come after me.

As if reading her thoughts, Jason X stopped moving. He looked at the shuttle, and she had the sense that he was staring into her eyes. That's crazy, totally insane. But he paused too long, and it gave her time to think.

London hit the reverse thrusters and the shuttle began backing away from the station at an angle, and now she could see deck one had fully detached. The shuttle still moved at half speed, but the change in direction made a difference. Soon the gap was too wide and she knew that unless he could fly—and she'd seen no sign of that—Jason X could not make the leap. He would be stranded on the station forever.

But as she watched him, standing in the doorway as the space door began to close, his body sent out vibrations of frustration. Murderous frustration. London knew he hadn't given up. Next time, he would not hesitate. And there would definitely be a next time.

For the rest of her life she would never be safe from Jason X.

SEVENTEEN

London felt wired. She manically checked the controls on the shuttle over and over, only to discover that even more systems were either down completely, or in bad shape. The com system for instance, which she needed for interspace communications might be working, or not, she couldn't tell. Right now, there was no one to communicate with.

She took stock of the supplies onboard and found just one spare suit, an old one, stuffed under a seat in the galley. It looked as if the fabric in the arm had a tear in it. Should she put it on frontward or backwards? Which arm did she not mind losing?

She found one spare air supply, and enough food and water for thirty days in pill form, and no more.

For all intents and purposes, Shuttle two was a derelict vessel, operating under severe limitations, basically a hunk of metal floating in space, short on supplies, with limited navigational abilities and an uncertain com system. She put out a call for help, both a verbal and a digital SOS, but there was no way to know if any of it traveled beyond the cabin of this vessel.

Exhausted, she collapsed back against the seat and let her body shake while she sobbed long and loudly, finally overcome with trauma, letting sleep take her.

Two hours later by the shuttle's clock she jolted awake. Her heart and brain both felt heavy. Then she remembered it all.

Her fate seemed bitter. Had she escaped Jason X only to die in this vessel from starvation a month from now? And why did she live when everyone else on the station was killed? Did Jason X—and she could still see him in her mind's eye, hanging onto the space door, prepared to leap—did he hesitate, or had she imagined that? Why would he hesitate? He could have reached the shuttle. It made no sense. Nothing made sense. No one could cope with all of this.

The emotional exhaustion allowed her to fall into another almost coma-like sleep, this one filled with dreams.

Bardox stands before her grinning. He has no arms, and arterial blood spurts from both shoulders. Behind him, on the steps of the emergency stairwell, sit Bill and Andre side by side.

"You have to take him out!" Renata shouts from behind her, and London spins around to see Renata yelling into the face of Akako. Jason X looms large behind them, the two women unaware.

"Be careful!" London screams.

"It's pointless," Bardox tells her, still grinning.

"Don't be afraid of fate," Andre assures her, and Bill nods, the top of his head mashed, holding before his eyes a ring that had belonged to Stanislav, who suddenly comes down the stairs holding hands with Felicity, walking in time to the wedding march. Behind them, in single file, are Bella Morte and Brandi, holding bouquets made of knives, as if this is a wedding party of the damned.

"Don't let them fool you," Emery says, but it is just his voice, he is nowhere to be seen.

"What do you mean?" London asks, watching, unable to act as Jason X raises that huge, deadly knife.

"He's human," Emery says.

London bolted upright to consciousness. By the clock, only ten minutes had passed, until she checked the date. A full day had gone by.

She moved to stand up and felt her body bruised and sore, her knee so swollen she could not easily stand on that leg.

Groaning, she picked herself up anyway and searched the entire shuttle out of fear, terrified that she had deluded herself and that Jason X had managed to jump aboard. The one place he might be, unless he was clinging to the outside of the vessel, was the storage cabin. She could not bring herself to open the door from inside. If he was there, he would break through. If he was not, she might expose

herself to airless space if the outside door was missing, and she seemed to remember that it was.

Instead, she made a scan of the vessel for heat signs and found only her own. She recognized that she could never be certain that he was not close by. Her entire life would be lived in fear and paranoia, if she survived beyond thirty days.

She needed to occupy herself and searched the shuttle's interior cupboard by cupboard, making a voice list of everything on board, not discriminating, because she did not know what she might need. Perhaps the most useful as well as the most useless item onboard was Bill's oneoman pod, which took up the lion's share of cabin space. If anything happened to the shuttle she could always get in that. Right, she thought, and then I'll be completely isolated. No com system at all, not much in the way of navigational ability, probably no food or water. Probably my only air from the suit with the rip in the sleeve...

She shook her head, wondering if she should just eject the pod out into space now and get the excess weight off the shuttle, which probably slowed it down even further. But she thought, hell, why not keep it. Bill had had faith in the thing, and it might come in handy, who knew? Besides, she suspected that the elimination of that weight wouldn't do much for the shuttle's speed. And she really did not know if the eject would work properly, or expose the entire interior to airlessness. She just prayed the shuttle's power supply held out.

Once she had plotted a vague course for the nearest space station, at least in the quadrant where she remembered it was located—hey, what's a few million light years off course?—she had nothing much else to do but did not relish sleep and the dreams she knew awaited her.

She took a pill, which substituted for a meal, and one for water, deciding that she would keep it to two meals a day, half rations.

One of the few systems that seemed to be functional—although the shuttle's self-diagnostic was not—were the scanners. The human diagnostic seemed to be okay, and she scanned her body for injuries. Maybe if she ran out of things to do she could record a personal log just in case she... just in case.

"Diagnostic of London Jefferson complete."

"Injuries?"

"Multiple bruises and contusions, specifically lower back, left arm, rib cage, right leg and neck strains. Sprain of the right knee. Hairline fracture in large toe, left foot—"

"Anything life threatening?"

"Negative."

"Anything else I should know about?"

"Depletion of B-twelve vitamins, and iron."

"That must be stress related."

"Negative."

London raised her eyebrows. "Geez, what? Do I have some sort of fatal illness now?"

"Negative. Depletions are a result of your condition."

She shook her head. "What condition?"

"Pregnancy."

"What?" she yelled.

"Pregnancy."

"I heard you but your diagnosis is wrong."

"Diagnosis is accurate."

London fell into the captain's chair. "I'm pregnant?"

"Affirmative."

When she'd recovered enough to think, she asked, "DNA scan of fetus," although she knew who the father was, who it had to be.

"Scan complete."

It was so ironic. She had pushed for children and Andre had never wanted them, or at least not now. But then he didn't want a commitment either. Now here she was, alone in the shuttle, without him; pregnant with his baby. A child he would never get to see.

"How old is the fetus?"

"One week."

That made sense. It was their last tryst, in the control room.

"Gender of fetus?"

"Male."

"Eye color?"

"Blue."

She sat up. "How can that be? Andre had brown eyes, his parents had brown eyes, I've seen images of his line back four hundred years and they all had brown eyes. And I have blue eyes; the brown should have been dominant. Recheck eye color of embryo?"

"Blue."

Maybe the diagnostic was not working properly. "Analysis. Is it possible for ten generations of brown eyes to produce a blue-eyed child?"

"Possible but improbable."

"Alright..." It was conceivable that Andre possessed a recessive gene and had inherited it. Sometimes lineage was not as obvious as it was presented. "Scan medical records of G7 crew, Andre Desjardines for recessive eye gene."

While the computer worked, she thought about the child growing inside her, just one week in development. He had survived all of the violence and chaos around it. Now she had to survive to protect his life. Could she do that, given the circumstances? She hoped so. No, she had to.

Finally the computer said, "DNA analysis complete. No recessive eye genes are present."

"Andre is the father. How can that be?"

"Andre Desjardines is not the father of the embryo."

"What?" She jumped to her feet. "That's crazy, who's the father then?"

"The father of the embryo is unknown, but particles of nanotechnology have been detected in the nucleotides."

London sat staring at nothing, and moments passed slowly. It could not be. Her eyes passed over the interior of the shuttle, not focusing on anything. Instinctively, she knew that it was so. It explained so much. It explained everything. Somehow she knew it, she just did, and her stomach turned at the thought. A solitary tear emerged from her eye, following the line of her face, hanging in the air as if it were a body floating through space, and it hit the floor.

Inside of her, growing slowly as she thought about it, was the child of Jason Voorhees.